

He Wants to Know by [LiaGwriter](#)

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Summary: On a routine day at Hawkins High, Mike Wheeler comes across a girl he doesn't recognize hiding out in the AV room. After an awkward first encounter, he's determined to be friendlier next time around. As he finds himself drawn to her, Mike begins to learn that she holds secrets he could never imagine.

1. Chapter 1

Hey everyone! This story was originally posted on Archive of Our Own, but I decided to post it here as well in case there are some ST/Mileven fans who exclusively read fanfic on this site. This is an AU that is mostly canon to the show in terms of El having her powers, but it's set in High School, grade ten for the Party. I'm going to post the first five chapters, and depending on the response I'll go ahead and post the rest. I hope you enjoy it! :)

Hawkins, Indiana - 1986.

Mike strode down the quiet hallway, lazily swinging his key ring back and forth. The clubs secretary had yet to give him a separate set of keys for the AV room, and it was becoming a real pain. Until then, he was stuck with this big clunky thing that also held the keys to a bunch of storage rooms, some electrical panels and, he suspected, a few fire extinguisher cases.

The secretary had given him a long lecture on not using any of the other keys to cause "any sort of ruckus" - that this was an exception made because of his reputation (among teachers, Mike thought, not students) as a good student with a so-called "clean record". It was embarrassing, but she was right.

Neither Mike nor any of the other members of the AV club, who also happened to be his three best friends, had even thought about breaking into a storage room or using a fire extinguisher to pull some kind of prank.

He knew a handful of kids in the tenth grade who would definitely view the key ring as a gold mine. But by the time AV club rolled around each week, Mike and his friends were so eager to escape the daily minefield of Hawkins High that they could care less about what went on outside of their little haven. Sure, it made them nerds - but granted, that's what they were. Tech-savvy nerds who made up a pretty kickass AV club. Mike smiled at the thought.

As club President, it was his job to head to the room each Wednesday to make sure it was ready and the equipment was all working for the next day's meeting. Not many people used the AV room, but sometimes the kids from student radio made a mess that they always failed to clean. It was annoying, but Mike didn't mind the chance to duck away from lunch each week for some peace and quiet.

It was the end of September and still warm enough to eat outside, so the hallways were blessedly clear and Mike whistled as he rounded the corner towards the room.

As he approached he spotted Barry, his favourite janitor, mopping up a spill. He looked up as Mike approached, alerted by the obnoxious jangling of his keys. That was how they'd become friends in the first place. Mike had passed Barry a few times on his way to the AV room, and each time Barry proclaimed: "Thought you were a janitor, with all those damn keys clanking!" Each time, Mike smiled, joking back: "Nope, just President of the most important club at Hawkins."

Barry took a liking to him after enough of those exchanges and would even help him out sometimes, carrying equipment or secretly reporting students if they made a mess of the AV room.

"President Wheeler," Barry said, his usual greeting. "Sir Barry," Mike shot back, grinning. It took him a few minutes to locate the proper key - he'd been steadily improving his time each week - before he finally found it and slid it in the lock. He opened the door and tossed his backpack on the table beside it like always.

His next move was to flip on the light switch, but as he turned to do so, he saw that it was already on. He glanced around the small room to find the source of this unexpected break in routine.

A girl was crouched at the far right corner of the large equipment table, looking at Mike with frightened eyes. He frowned at her stance, thinking maybe he'd scared her - but then he realized she must have been getting up to leave when he opened the door.

She was clutching a brown paper bag in one hand, a half-eaten sandwich and bottle of juice in the other. She stood frozen, curly brown hair falling in her eyes. There were about seven feet between

them, but Mike could see that her hands were shaking.

"Um.... hi?" He said, mentally kicking himself at how it sounded like a question. It wasn't wrong for her to be there, of course, and it wasn't like Mike had free reign over this room or anything. But who would want to be in here during lunch on a day like today?

The girl shook her head, and it seemed to snap her out of her trance. In a frantic manner, she started to gather up some things on the desk in front of her, clumsily placing them in her arms. "I-I'm so sorry," she said, sounding breathless. Mike stayed by the door, a little taken aback but not nearly as flustered as she seemed to be. He didn't recognize her, but that didn't surprise him; Hawkins was a big school, and she looked like she could be in either a grade above or below him.

"It's uh - no worries," he offered, stepping into the room a little more. She didn't respond, and collected the last of her things. He noticed that her clothes seemed a little too big for her - the jeans worn in, the plaid shirt hanging almost to her knees. Knowing that no other clubs met on Wednesday at lunch, Mike wondered how she got into the room.

"Are you a club President or something?" He asked as she shuffled around the table toward the door. But his words seemed to throw her off even more and she stepped forward cautiously, glancing up and him and back down again, like she was afraid to meet his eyes. God, had he scared her that much?

"I-no, no... I just..." she looked back at the table where she'd been sitting, then back at Mike. "I'm sorry, I won't come in here again," she mumbled, her voice trailing off so that Mike could barely hear her.

"Oh - no, it's really fine," Mike replied, feeling bad that she seemed to think she'd done something really wrong.

"I just was wondering how you got in here, I mean - I have this stupid key ring the clubs secretary gave me. I mean it's not stupid, it's more like - it's so annoying that they can't just give me the individual key or whatever. They said something about collateral, but I really think they're just lazy, or they don't want to give out the good key rings

because people keep using them to pick the locks to the girls' locker rooms, which is super weird and perverted - and I don't know, anyway, sine I'm AV club President I'm here a couple of times a week, usually just..." but before he could finish, the girl was rushing past him and out the door.

He turned around, but she'd already rounded the corner and was out of sight. Mike stood for a moment, his hand still on the doorknob.

He had a tendency to ramble, which everyone - mostly his friends - told him was super annoying. Clearly this girl had thought the same, and maybe that's why she hurried away without saying anything. "Smooth, Wheeler," he muttered to there had been a question at the beginning that she hadn't answered. How did she get into the room?

Mike closed the door behind him, and got to work preparing the space for the next day. As he cycled through the usual tasks, he realized how silly he was being. She probably just slipped in earlier if someone was in here, or if a previous club had accidentally forgotten to lock the door behind them. There was really nothing strange about it. Except for that look in her eyes; a mix of surprise, some embarrassment, but mostly... fear.

It stayed with him the rest of the day as the lunch bell rang and classes resumed. *I couldn't have scared her that much*, Mike kept telling himself. At nearly six feet tall with lanky limbs and an unruly mess of black hair, no one had ever called Mike scary or intimidating - his friends would probably burst out laughing if he tried to suggest so. If anything, most people at Hawkins High were either unbothered by or didn't notice his presence at all, what with his ever so popular title of AV club President. So what, exactly, had she been so afraid of?

The next day, Mike made his way down the same hallway, but this time he was trailed by three other boys - Dustin, Lucas, and Will, his fellow AV club members, his best friends since childhood.

True to form, Dustin and Lucas were arguing about who last borrowed a certain comic from the other. Mike was only half-listening, and he tuned in to hear Lucas's voice rising in pitch: "First of all, you owe me from our last trip to the arcade when I saved your

ass so you could keep the high score on Dig Dug. I basically protected you from a lifetime of ridicule!"

Lucas lived with a fierce sense of right and wrong, good and bad, just and unjust. He was the one you always wanted in your corner, the one you knew would never violate any sort of friendship code unless circumstances were, as he called it, "Divinely ordained".

Dustin, on the other hand, was prone to doing things like forgetting to return comics, begging for someone to cover him for quarters at the arcade, and grabbing the last french fry from your lunch tray. But those were just his quirks. He was the most thoughtful person Mike knew, and always had a pulse on what was going on in everyone's lives. It wasn't unlike him to radio Mike on their Supercomms the night before a big test to wish him luck, or to be the first to make peace and mediate any disagreements the four of them had - except for when it was him and Lucas head-to-head, which was a different story altogether.

Will, who was walking up beside Mike and away from the devolving argument, was his closest friend. He could tell Will things he couldn't tell Dustin or Lucas; not because he wanted to exclude them, but because Will just seemed to get things.

Having grown up with a volatile and then absent father, and a single Mom who sometimes struggled to keep things together, Will had his fair share of heartache early on in life. While some people grow hardened by that kind of experience, Will came away with the opposite; patience, sensitivity, and a keen ability to read people and situations with an empathetic eye.

Mike trusted him more than anyone, and vice versa. Plus, Will's rational and level-headed disposition had come in handy for their crew many, many times.

As they all clambered into the room, Mike flicked on the light switch and was reminded of what had happened yesterday. He hadn't told anyone about it yet, and he was almost hesitant to bring it up and take time away from their precious two hours in the AV room.

"Was someone sitting in my seat?" Lucas said from across the room.

Mike looked up and saw him standing in the same spot the girl had been yesterday.

"What?" Dustin asked, unpacking his bag.

Lucas looked down and crossed his arms. "My chair wasn't pushed in all the way."

There was a collective eye-rolling, and Mike sighed. Of course Lucas would notice - something in his ever-righted world had been upended, and he wouldn't stop until there was an explanation. Luckily, Mike had it.

"Yeah actually, when I came in here to do prep yesterday some girl was sitting there." All of them stopped what they were doing and looked up at him, wide-eyed. He knew what was coming next. "Was she cute?" they said in unison like a well-rehearsed choir.

Of all the inside jokes they had, this one was most popular of late. It was born out of the fact that, as their spot on one of the lowest rungs of the social ladder at Hawkins would have it, interaction with girls was mediocre at best.

While they'd gone to a few parties and had friends they talked to in their separate classes, the group mostly kept to themselves, meaning dating wasn't something any of them had quite mastered yet - give or take a few awkward spin-the-bottle encounters.

So to make light of the sort of pathetic situation, they'd started applying the question to any and all interaction with any and all members of the opposite sex. So if Dustin said something like, "My Mom had a friend over last night," they'd all shoot back, "Was she cute?" Or when Will complained that the lady at the post office gave him a hard time about his *Popular Science* subscription renewal, they'd commiserate and then ask, "Was she cute?" Or if any of them ever went to the school nurse, who was a known curmudgeon, they'd say each time, without fail, "Was she cute?"

It was kind of a rhetorical question that always got them laughing. But this time Mike was genuinely thinking about it, unable to recall detail from the rushed encounter.

"She was - I don't know, actually," he told them. "Her clothes were too big," he added lamely.

"Her clothes? So you got a real chance to check her out then, huh?" Dustin teased, but Mike waved it off.

"No, I mean - I came in and she was at Lucas's seat, but I think I scared her or something because she like, ran out and kept apologizing."

"Well, with that terrifying presence of yours," Will teased, and the rest of them laughed.

"What was she doing in here?" Lucas asked, having finally situated his chair the way he liked it.

Mike remembered the brown paper bag she'd scooped up off the desk. "I don't know, I think she was just eating lunch."

"Wow, that's depressing," Lucas retorted, "Even we have each other to eat lunch with."

Mike's heart sank a little. It hadn't occurred to him that maybe she'd come into the AV room to avoid the embarrassment of eating alone, or even just to find some refuge from the intimidating and sometimes ruthless nature of Hawkins High.

That, he understood.

"Maybe she's just new here," Dustin offered. "Actually, come to think of it..."

He went on to explain that on Monday in third-period English, Ms. Williams had hastily introduced a new student, who had looked like she wanted to die of embarrassment. The teacher said something about homeschooling, but that was all Dustin remembered. "And that she looked really...."

"Scared?" Mike offered

Dustin looked up at him and frowned. "She had that same look yesterday, like a... deer in headlights, or something."

Dustin pointed up to his head, "Curly brown hair? Just a bit longer than mine?"

Mike nodded.

"Well, I guess it's fine that she didn't push in my chair all the way," Lucas said – immediately adding 'I'm just joking!' when they all rolled their eyes again. "Being new sucks, I don't blame her for wanting to just avoid it all. Plus, who starts at a new school three weeks into the year? All the prime friend-making opportunities are basically gone," he said.

The rest of them murmured in agreement.

They launched into their usual tactics, goofing around with the microphones and making up fake radio-show personas. Mike forgot all about their conversation, the rest of the world disappearing like it always did during AV club.

But as things came to a close and they packed up to leave, he kept thinking about the girl - about how Dustin had also noticed that skittish look in her eyes. Pangs of guilt hit him – *I should have been nicer*, he thought. She was new, eating lunch alone, and obviously needed a friend, and he'd just barged in all accusatory and frightened her instead.

If I see her again, I'll say Hello properly, he vowed to himself. He fumbled with the key ring as his friends teased him for being so slow, like always, before finally locking the door behind them.

2. Chapter 2

I'd love to hear your feedback so leave a comment if you wish! If you have any questions, writing prompts, or just want to come obsess over Stranger Things/Mileven, you can find me here on Tumblr: [.com](#)

It was Friday night, and Mike's Mom had mandated a proper family dinner. His older sister Nancy was home for the weekend, and his Mom was insistent on making sure they all spent "quality time" together.

Mike didn't know why it was such a big deal. This was already Nancy's second time coming back to Hawkins since going away to college in Indianapolis. She kept saying she was homesick, but Mike knew it was really to visit Jonathan Byers, her boyfriend of just over a year.

He was also Will's older brother, which was the source of endless teasing from Dustin and Lucas to both him and Mike.

Jonathan stayed behind to work for a year and save money before heading off to college, and from what Mike knew, he and Nancy had vowed to make it work.

She got home earlier that afternoon claiming she was tired from the drive, disappearing upstairs to take a nap. That left Mike with the task of setting the table and minding his little sister Holly while his Mom cooked dinner.

He was already annoyed with Nancy by the time they sat down to eat, so he tuned out the conversation she had going on with his parents about her classes and other college stuff he didn't care to hear about. He focused on his food, picking away at a piece of meatloaf when he felt his Mom nudge him.

"Mike, your sister is speaking to you." She raised her eyebrows expectantly.

He looked up at Nancy. "What?"

His Mom nudged him again. "Michael!" She hissed.

Nancy rolled her eyes. "I said, have you met the Chief's daughter yet?"

He frowned at her. "What are you talking about? Didn't his kid die like, years ago?"

He instantly bit his tongue and looked nervously over at Holly. She gazed up at him, her eyes already brimming with tears. She was at that age where any mention of death or people getting hurt really upset her.

"Awh shit," Mike said under his breath, and his Mom reached over to squeeze his arm.

"Michael, you are skating on thin ice," she warned.

He leaned toward Holly, reaching a hand out to tickle under her chin. "Gotcha!" Mike said as she swatted his hand away. He did it again and she laughed, her face brightening up as if nothing had happened. Phew.

Nancy continued. "Sorry, his *adopted* daughter. Remember last summer?"

Mike thought about it. He vaguely recalled rumors about the strange girl the police Chief had adopted after working on a case she was involved in somewhere on the outskirts of the county.

Something like that would've normally been major gossip, sure to spread like the plague in a small town like Hawkins. But it happened during summer, when half the town had escaped to some kind of summer home, replaced by road-tripping tourists who could care less about small-town scandals.

So while the rumors flew about the mystery behind the Chief's new daughter, they never quite caught steam. Plus, Mike and his friends had been so anxious about starting high school then that they didn't pay much attention to anything else.

All he really remembered about last summer was biking from the store to the river and back again with his friends, each of them occasionally punctuating the thick summer heat with questions like: 'Do you think gym class is like, mandatory?'. Or Dustin's ever-present refrain: 'What if we have different lunch periods? Son of a bitch, I can't handle being alone at lunch'.

"Yeah. I mean, I don't know much about it, but yeah," Mike replied.

"Well, she's in your grade. I think her name's Jean, or Jane, or something," Nancy said.

"How do you know?" Mike asked.

"Jonathan ran into Steve yesterday," Nancy said. "He's training to be a deputy, so he's been with the Chief a decent amount."

There was an awkward shift in the air at the mention of Steve Harrington – well, at least for Nancy there seemed to be. Steve was her ex-boyfriend, the one she left to be with Jonathan. The details about how exactly that happened were still a little murky to Mike and Will, but the party line was that she'd stayed with Steve while harboring feelings for Jonathan all along.

Steve had been a real stand-up guy about the whole thing – as evidenced by the fact that he could chat casually with Jonathan when he ran into him.

Mike thought they were both nice guys; Jonathan drove him and his friends around when it got too cold to bike, and Steve had chased bullies away from them more than once in more than a few parking lots around town. He was always popular enough to be able to do that.

Mike suspected Nancy still felt guilty about it all, given the way her voice always dropped at the mention of his name.

Nancy seemed to realize that no one had reacted to the mention of Steve, so she cleared her throat and went on.

"Anyway, the Chief's been saying to Steve how he's worried about her starting school. He had to homeschooled her for the past year – I guess

she was really behind or something."

Mike was holding his fork in midair, ready to take a bite, but stopped. "Homeschooled?"

He remembered what Dustin said about the new student in his English class – it had to have been the Chief's daughter he'd met in the AV room.

Well, he didn't technically meet her, he thought guiltily. She'd rushed out before he could ask her name.

"Hm. I uh... haven't met her." Mike said.

His sister shrugged. "Well, I'd say you should befriend her, but I don't think being seen with you and your nerd gang would be good for her burgeoning reputation."

Now it was her turn to be scolded. "Nancy, don't talk to your brother like that!" His Mom said, her voice rising.

Mike had already thrown his napkin at her, but his Mom either didn't notice or didn't say anything.

Nancy laughed. "I'm kidding – look, it might be nice if you said Hi to her or something. I'm sure she'd appreciate it."

Mike went back to picking his meatloaf, blushing at the fact that his sister voiced what he'd already been planning to do. "Yeah, maybe," was all he said.

No matter how old he got, Saturday was still Mike's favorite day of the week.

Barring extreme weather events, weddings, or funerals, the gang always spent hours doing something fun: playing Dungeons and Dragons, going for bike rides if the weather was nice, or, as of late, going to the movies to catch a double feature.

This week, it was *Aliens* followed by *The Fly*, movies all of them had seen at least twice.

But it was a rainy day, and they liked both of them enough to head to the theatre, take up their usual row – fourth from the back – and quiz each other on which scene was coming up next and who died in what sequence.

Jonathan drove them, but Nancy was in the front seat, forcing the four of them to squish uncomfortably in the back. They arrived and hustled out of the car, Mike cursing Nancy under his breath. "I heard that!" she yelled out the window as they pulled away.

Sensing his frustration, Lucas nudged him. "When do you think the wedding will be? Spring?" Mike turned to see his face cracked into a full grin – teasing was Lucas's forte.

"Shut up, man," Mike replied. Lucas clapped a good-natured hand on his shoulder and they headed inside.

The theatre was nearly empty, and they settled into their spots in the usual order: Dustin closest to the aisle, then Lucas, then Will, then Mike.

The previews hadn't started yet, so Mike leaned forward to face them, eager to update them on what he'd learned from Nancy.

"Hey guys," he said, throwing a piece of popcorn at Dustin's hat to get his attention – he and Lucas were engaged in some kind of argument, as usual. They all turned to look at him.

"I think that girl I saw in the AV room is Chief Hopper's adopted daughter – the one people were talking about last summer?"

He could see the interest pique on all of their faces. "He homeschooled her for a year because she was behind or something," he said, adding the bit about how Jonathan had run into Steve. "Nancy said she's in our grade."

"Oh yeah," Dustin said, "I overheard my Mom talking about her on the phone with a friend once, back in August. She said he rescued her from some kind of bad situation."

"I heard she was crazy and couldn't talk or something, so he hid her away until she could get normal or whatever," Lucas added.

"Maybe that explains why she looked scared when you saw her," Will offered. "She probably hasn't hung around people her own age in a while."

"Hey, shitheads – would you shut up?" Someone hissed from a few rows in front of them. The previews had just come on, and Mike knew the scolding was probably from one of the other double-feature regulars – it happened a lot.

Mike turned back in his seat. After a moment, he looked over at Will. "Nancy said I should say Hi to her – that the Chief was worried about her starting school."

Will smiled. "Well maybe you should, Saint Michael."

Mike laughed and shoved his arm, turning back to the screen as the opening credits of *Alien* began.

'Saint Michael' was the nickname his friends had given him back in seventh grade, when they were biking to the comic store and had come across a little girl on a scooter who had fallen on the sidewalk. She was crying hysterically and holding her knee, which had a scrape no larger than a paperclip.

The rest of the boys had whizzed by and gotten almost to the end of the street before they realized they were missing Mike.

They'd turned back only to find him crouched in front of the girl, waving his hands and making silly faces. He stayed with her until her Mom finally caught up, and by the time she got there, the girl had stopped crying and was laughing at Mike's antics.

He knew the minute he got back on his bike that he'd never live it down. He tried to defer the teasing, claiming he just knew what to do because of Holly – which was true.

But his friends were relentless, and the nickname stuck. Any time he did something moderately kind, like give Will his extra snacks, or help a delivery guy carry a box into Benny's Diner, the 'Saint Michael' chant was sure to ensue.

Will always told him not to worry about it, that it was a good thing.

"You've always been the good guy, Mike," he liked to say.

He could hear Dustin and Lucas re-starting their previous argument in whispers, and he rolled his eyes at Will.

It was only a matter of time before "Can it, shitheads!" was thrown back towards them again.

Mike felt nervous before school on Monday, thinking about how he'd keep his internal promise and find a way to introduce himself to Jean, or Jane, or whatever her name was.

On his bike ride to school, he replayed the lines in his head – *Hey, I'm Mike Wheeler – I think you were in the AV room the other day? Anyways, I'm the AV club President. It's nice to meet you.*

Should he tell her he was AV club President? Would that make her want to run the other way, like she had when he saw her last?

Who cares? Why am I overthinking it?

But he knew deep down it was because he felt sorry for her – not that she would want his pity or anything. It was that scared look in her eyes, the way she apologized as if she'd really hurt him or something.

He hated to admit it, but his friends were right - it was a stupid Saint Michael thing.

But the day passed and he didn't see her, even though he scanned the halls for her at every break and at lunch. Tuesday was the same, and he still hadn't seen her when it came time to prep the AV room on Wednesday.

He searched for the key, wondering if she'd be in the room. But he swung the door open to find it empty.

As he moved over to the equipment table, he noticed something resting on the table by Lucas's seat – the same spot she'd been in last week.

He walked over and saw that it was a paper crane, with drawings on

each side. It was perfectly made; the paper smooth, the curves and edges exactly matched.

On one side there was a drawing of microphones, music notes, and a pair of headphones, each all different colors.

'AV club' was written on the other side, drawn as a logo with slanted letters, encased in an expertly drawn cassette tape.

Mike studied it for a moment, then looked down. There was a note on the table, on a small ripped piece of paper.

He picked it up. In clumsy handwriting were the words: "I'm sorry."

3. Chapter 3

The sun was just starting to dip lower in the sky as Mike hopped onto his bike and coasted down the driveway. The days were already getting shorter, and pretty soon his occasional after-dinner bike rides would be too – unless he used that obnoxious bike light his Mom had forced him to keep.

It wasn't unlike him to want to go out by himself to blow off some steam, but this time he especially needed it.

Assuming it was the Chief's daughter who had left the paper crane and the note – which it just had to be – he couldn't wrap his head around why she felt the need to say sorry, again.

Maybe I looked really pissed off, he wondered, replaying the interaction over in his head for what felt like the hundredth time.

There was another thing too. The drawing of the words 'AV club' meant she at least caught a little bit of his ramble before hurrying out the door.

Was it a gift? A peace offering? If so, for what?

Most of all, it seemed... childish. He thought about what Will said at the movie theatre about how she probably hadn't spent time around people her age in a while.

How bad, exactly, was the situation she came from?

If she had to be homeschooled for a year, maybe she'd been out of school for a while before that – or had never gone at all. He pedaled faster, the air rushing past him. He thought about the paper crane sitting on the desk in his room.

Strange as it was, it was still kind. He'd say Hi to her and add one more thing – *thank you*.

By lunch the next day he still hadn't seen her, and Mike began to feel frustrated.

Each time he packed and unpacked his bag he saw the paper crane, resting safely on top of his books. What was this girl, invisible?

By the time AV club came around, he'd pretty much given up hope. As they set up, he thought about showing his friends the crane, but decided against it – though he wasn't sure why.

Lucas snapped his fingers, and Mike flinched.

"Mike, listen up! This is a highly advanced process," he said.

He went on to demonstrate some kind of sound mixing technique he'd learned from his Dad a few days ago. Mike didn't think it was all that special, but he just smiled, letting Lucas have his moment. He always got so excited to show them something new, by far the keenest of the four of them.

When their time was up, Mike headed off in the direction of the clubs lounge, and his friends hustled toward the doors.

"Wait up for me this time?" he called to them.

As President, he was stuck with the annoying task of having to return the key ring to the club secretary each week; a process that took an inordinately long time since she always inspected the ring to make sure the most important keys were still there.

Sometimes his friends waited for him, sometimes they didn't – it depended on a few things: how hungry they all were, if Lucas had a new comic waiting at home, or if Will had to help his Mom with something.

This time, it was the first one.

"Sorry man, I'm starving! I had soup for lunch today – soup!" Dustin shouted, sounding thoroughly unimpressed.

He glanced at Mike and Lucas, who just shrugged.

"Alright then, smell ya later, jerks!" He shouted after them.

"Not a chance!" Lucas yelled back.

Normally he was annoyed when they didn't wait, but today he didn't mind. He needed to think some more, as evidenced by the fact that he kept zoning out during the glacial key return process. Finally, he made his way out of the clubs lounge.

He turned left toward the doors to the parking lot, and saw someone standing at their locker near the end of the short hallway.

He squinted, trying to make out who it was. He could tell the person couldn't hear him approaching – they were still turned into their locker, taking things out and loading them into a backpack on the ground.

It was the curly hair that gave him the first hint; like Dustin's, but longer. Her.

Her head was bent down toward her backpack. But she must've heard him coming, because she looked up just then.

Yep, it was her – those wide, frightened eyes were the last clue. Determined not to give her the wrong impression like he had in the AV room, he smiled and raised a hand to wave at her. "Hey!"

Mike cringed at himself. He could see the whole set up, like it was some cheesy high school movie – *guy walks up to girl he likes at her locker, effortless flirting ensues.*

Even though it wasn't like that, he still felt nervous. Mike Wheeler was not the kind of guy who talked to girls at their lockers.

And then he was in front of her, relieved to see that some of the fear in her eyes had diminished. Instead, she looked... curious.

"Hi," she said, holding her backpack in her arms in front of her.

There was a pause, and Mike thought he might as well launch into the speech he'd been rehearsing since last week.

"I uh – you were in the AV room, right? I'm Mike Wheeler," he said, leaving out the part about being AV club President in case she remembered that.

He stuck out his right hand and she frowned at it. Slowly, she took a hand away from her bag and reached out to shake it.

"Y-yeah, that was me," she said, dropping his hand after a moment. "I'm Jane."

Jane, not Jean - alright good, Mike thought.

He swung his backpack off his shoulders, placing it on the floor in front of him. He could feel her eyes on him. He unzipped the top and took out the paper crane – it was still in perfect condition. She looked at it, then back up at him, waiting.

"This is uh – really cool! It's really good, same with the drawings." He glanced at her, but she wasn't looking at him. He noticed she was blushing.

"Where did you learn how to make these?" He said.

She hugged her backpack tighter. "I.... taught myself," she replied.

He nodded, expecting that to be the answer – who ever remembers lessons from grade school art class?

"Well, it's really cool. Thanks for... leaving it there."

She nodded, still blushing. She smiled a little, and Mike felt his own face get hot. He thought back to his friends' question from last week – she was definitely cute. He couldn't believe he hadn't noticed it the first time.

"But I mean," he added, "You really have nothing to be sorry for – we weren't using the room that day or anything, I was just there to get things in order."

She met his eyes again and he knew for sure he was blushing now. Though it was timid, there was something about her gaze.

"Okay," was all she said.

Mike didn't know why he felt the need to keep talking – she hadn't asked him any questions, and it didn't even seem like she wanted to

keep talking to him. But there was just... something.

"Listen, um, I know you're new here. If you need... if you wanted someone to eat lunch with, you could totally eat with me and my friends. But only if you want to," he blurted.

She smiled even wider. "*Was she cute?*" She was *way* more than cute.

"Okay," she said again.

Mike couldn't tell if that was a yes, and he couldn't read the look on her face either. It occurred to him that maybe she thought he was asking her because she was eating alone in the AV room, and was embarrassed. Or didn't want his pity. Smooth, Wheeler. The part of him that liked to ramble uncontrollably was bubbling to the surface. God, not again.

"I mean, we're not the most... cool people, but we're funny – well I mean, Dustin is mostly the funny one. But Lucas is too! When the two of them get going it's really ridiculous, but still kind of funny. And Will's really smart, I mean I mostly just listen to them all, I..." he noticed her frown, and that stopped him. "I'm sorry," he murmured.

"Cool?" she said. Mike met her eyes again.

He couldn't tell if her not knowing what cool meant was a good or a bad thing right now.

"Yeah, like...popular, or whatever," Mike said.

She nodded. "It's okay. I'd like that." She furrowed her brow and shook her head back and forth. "To sit with you... I mean. I'd like that."

Mike must've smiled really wide, because she returned it a moment later. "Really? Okay, great, well..." he looked towards the door. "You walking out?"

She slung her backpack on and closed her locker. "My Dad is picking me up," she said.

They walked down the rest of the hall, and Mike glanced at her. She

was taller than average, he guessed, but still came up to just his shoulder. He also noticed how she said 'Dad' and not 'Hopper' or 'Chief'. They must be close.

He opened the door and she passed by him, brushing across his side. His pulse quickened. *What is going on?*

"What were you doing here so late anyway?" Mike asked, trying to sound casual. "Usually there's no one here by the time AV club is over."

She walked over to the brick wall beside the doors, leaning against it and hugging her backpack in front of her again.

"Oh um... I had to talk to the guidance counsellor," she said, for some reason struggling over those last words. "Something with my schedule."

Mike nodded. His bike was at the rack just around the corner from where she was standing, but he didn't feel like leaving yet. He was trying to figure out what to say when the sound of tires screeching on pavement interrupted his thoughts.

It was the Chief's beat up Chevy Blazer, the one he drove both in and out of uniform. Some perks probably came with having "HAWKINS POLICE DEPT." emblazoned on your vehicle at all times. He pulled right up to where Jane was standing, his arm hanging out the window, a cigarette dangling from his lips. Mike didn't know the Chief very well, but if someone ever asked what he looked like, that image was the exact one Mike would offer.

The rumors about Jane were one thing, but Chief Hopper and his tragic past was an ever-present topic of conversation around town. It was common knowledge that he'd moved back to Hawkins after a stint as a big-city cop – and after his daughter died and his wife left him.

He lived in a rundown cabin on the outskirts of Hawkins, and because he kept to himself – unless he was pursuing a lady friend – the gossip about him flew in every direction, getting more outrageous with time.

Most people seemed to think he had a drinking problem. Or that he was never the same after his daughter died, and was prone to bouts of isolating himself in his cabin, not even bothering to page the station for days at a time. He heard kids at school talk about parties they'd been to that the Chief had come to bust up – about how his mere presence was enough to scare off even the rowdiest teenagers.

Mike never paid much attention to it, but he saw now that it was kind of true; the Chief's hulking, broad-shouldered frame and heavy brow made it look like he was permanently scowling.

Yeah, Mike thought, definitely wouldn't want to piss him off.

It didn't help that the Chief happened to be staring him down. He couldn't tell if it was because he was trying to remember if he knew Mike, or because he was standing next to his daughter.

Adopted daughter, he thought, correcting himself.

Mike looked at Jane, but she didn't seem fazed. He watched as she picked up her bag, still able to feel the Chief's eyes boring into him.

"Bye Mike," she said. "I'll see you..."

"At lunch," he replied, smiling.

"At lunch," she echoed.

The Chief reached over and opened the passenger door, his eyes never leaving Mike. It made Mike want to get out of there, fast. He headed to the bike rack, and he could hear the tires squealing away as he unlocked the chain.

He got on and pedaled fast, fast enough that the air whizzed by at top speed, drowning out his thoughts.

Lucas was already at school the next morning when Mike got there. He groaned. Him and Lucas had an ongoing competition – ongoing, but fierce – about who could get to school first in the mornings.

They lived pretty close to each other, but were always taking

different routes and devising new shortcuts to try to beat the other. Mike had been on a winning streak for the past three days, and now he'd lost it.

"Sucks to suck!" Lucas yelled as Mike pedaled up to the bike rack.

"I had to help Holly get ready! You know that takes forever," he whined.

Lucas folded his arms, looking smug. "Excuses, excuses."

They locked up their bikes and waited, waving as Dustin came into view. Will lived the furthest, so he was always last.

"So I talked to Jane yesterday," Mike said as Dustin locked up his bike.

Since the moment he'd invited her to eat with them, he was nervous about what his friends would think.

They always made decisions like that together as a group; as a united party, like in their Dungeons and Dragons days (not that those days were over, necessarily). Mike knew he'd broken that rule, and was afraid to upset the balance.

"Jane?" Lucas asked

"Yeah, the Chief's daughter," Mike told him.

"The crazy one?" Dustin said.

"She's not crazy," Mike replied, a little too quickly. "I saw her yesterday after returning the keys – after you assholes ditched me," he said, playfully punching Dustin's arm.

"And?" Lucas said. He sounded annoyed. Mike knew he wasn't going to like what was next.

"I may or may not have invited her to eat lunch with us," he blurted.

There was a pause. Mike looked at the ground, kicking his sneaker back and forth over the pavement.

Before any of them could say something, Will rolled up on his bike, coasting all the way into the rack. He smiled at them, but it only took a second for him to notice something was off.

"What's going on?" He said.

"Mike invited the crazy girl to eat lunch with us!" Lucas told him.

"She's not crazy!" Mike said again.

"How would you know? You've only talked to her once!"

"Lucas," Will said, in that steady voice that Mike instantly recognized as the one that had saved their asses from trouble more than once.

It was the voice of: *Dustin, I don't think you should eat funnel cake before we go on the spinning teacup ride, or Mike, maybe you shouldn't talk about the plot of 'Psycho' in front of Holly.* The voice of reason, always.

Will looked at Mike. "The Chief's daughter?"

"Yeah. Jane." Mike replied, proceeding to fill them all in on what happened after AV club.

"Man, but she didn't even ask if she could sit with us – you just offered, out of nowhere," Lucas said.

"It wasn't out of nowhere. Look, she seems really shy. From what we know, she didn't have the easiest life before coming here. Maybe she's not good at making friends, who knows. I... I just feel bad for her. It's just one time, okay?" He scanned their faces. Lucas was looking at the ground.

"I hear you, Mike," Dustin said. "But she's a sixteen-year-old girl, and she's new. Do you really think she wants to sit with a bunch of – I'm sorry guys, but it's true – nerdy dudes?"

"Dudes who are already their own group," Lucas mumbled.

Will piped up then. "Guys, come on. It's Friday – she'll eat with us today, and if she decides she can't stand us, then we'll have the

weekend's distance and things will be back to normal by Monday. And if not, then we'll deal with it, alright?"

Lucas looked like he had more to say, but Will had a way of clamping the lid on an argument. His words had a sense of finality none of them bothered to disrupt.

The bell rang, and they were forced to head inside. Will hung back beside Mike.

"It'll be fine, Mike," he said. "I mean, we should all know by now that you take the Saint Michael thing seriously."

Dustin overheard and looked back at them. "Yeah Mike, I don't care, as long as she gives me one of her snacks," he teased, breaking into a grin.

When it came time for them to split up, they all turned to say bye to each other. All of them, except for Lucas.

Mike headed to his locker, the midday bell still ringing. He was thinking about how annoying it was that time always drags on when you just need it to go faster, but speeds up exponentially when you least want it to.

Maybe there was a scientific explanation for it – something about how our perception of the speed of time adjusts in accordance with the events around us. Physics, probably. He'd have to look into it later.

Not that he's dreading seeing Jane or anything. But still. From what he could tell, she's not the most talkative person in the world, so he knew he'd have to be the one to carry on the conversation among all of them.

Normally he wouldn't have a problem with that, but the way his friends had reacted this morning – especially Lucas – made him nervous for the task.

He dropped off a few books and headed to the cafeteria, wondering if time was speeding up or slowing down now. As soon as he got to the

doors, he spotted Jane – well, he saw her, she didn't see him.

She was standing at the side of the large doorway, craning her head as if she were peeking into the room. One hand was clutching the door frame, and he could see her looking back and forth.

For some reason his heart sank – she was looking for him. Or she's just looking, he thought, quick to correct himself.

He went up to stand in her line of vision so as not to scare her. But she still jumped back a little when she saw him, pressing a hand to her chest.

"Hi!" Mike said. *God, eager much?*

"Hi," she said back, looking up at him. She had the same curious look in her eyes from yesterday.

"How's it going?" he said.

"Fine, I think," she replied. "What about you?"

"Pretty good, should we – "

But before Mike could finish, someone shoved him, hard. An angry: "Get out of the way, Wheeler!" followed.

He recognized the voice instantly – James, one of his childhood (and, if Mike was honest, current) bullies, who had only grown to be more of an ogre since high school.

He stumbled and fell against Jane's side, unable to catch his balance. But he felt her place a hand on his ribcage, and suddenly he was righted – as if gravity had swung him back the other way.

He blinked, straightening his sweater and turning to look at her. He remembered thinking she was frail when he first saw her, but maybe she was stronger than she looked.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," he said, embarrassed. "Just James being his

usual ogre-like self."

"Ogre?" She said as they moved into the cafeteria.

"Yeah, you know, like a big, stupid, ugly, mean guy. With warts on his face and stuff." He meant it to be funny, but she was still frowning.

He looked around to find Dustin and Will seated at their usual table – the far right corner, close to the ice cream cart. In freshman year when they were deciding where to sit, Dustin had demanded they be close to the dessert bar. None of them had any qualms about it, so that became their table.

"Hey guys," Mike said as he and Jane approached. "Jane, this is Will and Dustin," he added, eager to get introductions out of the way.

"Hi," she said to both of them, looking nervous again.

Dustin smiled at her.

"It's nice to meet you," Will said. *Thank God for Will.*

"Oh, and that's Lucas," Dustin added, looking past Mike and Jane.

Mike turned to see Lucas heading toward them, smiling. He stuck out a hand for Jane to shake once he reached them. "Nice to meet you," he said.

Even if Lucas was annoyed by the whole situation, Mike knew that wouldn't trump his more important desire to always do the right thing. That included always being kind and decent, even to people he didn't know.

Mike moved to take his seat beside Will, and Jane followed. She sat down right beside him. He could see Will smiling from the corner of his eye.

It was quiet as they all got out their lunches, and Mike felt desperate not to let it get awkward. But before he could say anything, Jane beat him to it.

"So, Dustin, Lucas, Will, and...Mike," she said, pointing at each of them in turn.

"Yep," Mike said. "Well, it's Michael, actually – I just go by Mike."

She was looking at him with that intent gaze.

"You don't go by your real name?" she asked.

Real name? Mike took a quick look around the table. His friends were wearing the same quizzical look he was.

"No, I do," Mike replied. "It's just a short version – a nickname."

She was looking down at the table, and for some reason Mike could tell she was turning the word over in her mind.

"Mine is like that too," Will said, and Jane looked up at him. "Will, short for William."

She pulled at the sleeves of her navy crewneck, sitting up and tucking her left leg underneath her. She was wearing the same baggy jeans as that day in the AV room, but this time they were rolled up at the ankle, with a pair of grey converse. Mike couldn't tell if that was their actual color, or if they started out white and had been worn into that shade.

"I don't go by my real name either," she said, looking back down at the table.

"No?" Mike said.

She shook her head.

"Jane is short for something?" Dustin asked her.

"No, not Jane... Eleven. My real name."

If it was quiet before, now it felt dead silent among them. Like the number? Mike thought, too dumb a question to say out loud.

Dustin apparently didn't care. "Like the number?"

Jane – Eleven? – nodded.

Lucas spoke next. "So Jane is..."

"The name my Dad gave me."

There it was again, thought Mike. Dad – plain and simple, no second thought.

She shifted in her seat, and Mike could sense her uneasiness. But he still didn't know what to say. So much for being the one to diffuse awkwardness.

"Do you have a preference?" Will asked, sounding unfazed. Mike thanked him mentally for the third time that day.

She thought for a moment. "I'm more used to Eleven, I guess... Jane feels weird, still. But I don't think people like Eleven."

The same feeling Mike had when he saw her looking for him in the cafeteria doorway surfaced.

"But do you like it?" he asked her.

She looked at him with those curious eyes. "I'm not sure."

"Well, Jane is too hard to make a nickname out of," Dustin announced. "I've been sitting here thinking of how it would work, but there's nothing really other than 'J', which is kind of lame. Eleven, on the other hand... that we could work with."

She broke into a grin – the first time Mike had seen her smile like that. Her whole face lit up and he felt that same kick in his pulse, just like when she brushed passed him in the doorway yesterday. *What is going on?*

Her smile kept getting better and better.

"What about... El?" Mike said, the name coming to him almost at the same time it left his mouth.

Dustin nodded. "Yep, that's where I was going, Mike – nice. El is

cool."

She looked around at all of them, still smiling.

"Lucas, thoughts?" Will said. "We need party consensus."

If there was one way to get Lucas to soften on anything, it was to refer to their crew as the 'party'. No one was a bigger D&D fan, and he was always the first to suggest it when they were bored on any given Saturday afternoon.

Will, ever the wise.

Lucas nodded. "Sounds good to me," he said.

Dustin raised his can of Coke. "To nicknames!" he shouted.

Jane – Eleven – no, El, laughed, also the first time Mike had heard her do that. He immediately decided he'd have to keep Dustin around at all times just so he could hear it again.

She raised her bottle of juice, mimicking Dustin. "To nicknames," she said, and they all cheered.

Out of the corner of his eye, Mike could see her smiling at him.

4. Chapter 4

"I swear, I thought she was kidding," Lucas said, sliding the pack of Nilla wafers across the table.

"It is a little strange," Will said, grabbing one and taking a bite. "What kind of parent names their kid Eleven?"

"I dunno, a mathematician? Someone even nerdier than us?" Lucas replied.

They were sitting at Dustin's kitchen table, waiting for him to get ready. It was Saturday and they were supposed to be on the way to the used book store in downtown Hawkins. But as usual, Dustin was taking forever to find his things.

They'd been assigned an independent study for English class. The list of books to choose from were mostly classics, so Lucas suggested the used book store – but Mike knew that was just because there was also a decent comic collection there.

From somewhere upstairs, Dustin shouted, "Mom, where's my green sweater?" followed by, "No, not the scratchy one!" They gave each other withering looks. They were at least another ten minutes away from leaving.

"Or, I know," Lucas said. "Maybe her Mom had a lot of kids, like too many to keep track of, so she just started numbering them."

"Lucas, come on," Mike said.

"What? The Chief adopted her, right? Maybe whoever had her just had way too many kids to deal with," Lucas retorted.

Of all the theories they'd discussed about El's name since Friday's lunch, that one was most plausible. Thinking about it gave Mike a weird feeling. Eleven. So clinical and matter-of-fact. Whoever gave it to her clearly wasn't sentimental.

Dustin barged into the room, out of breath. "Alright, I'm ready, let's – hey, get away from my Nilla wafers!" He snatched the pack off the

table, grabbing two wafers before closing it.

Lucas looked incredulous. "How is it possible for you to be such a stickler when someone touches your food, but every day at lunch you steal a snack from at least one of us, and we never make a damn peep?"

Dustin started putting his sweater on. "Lucas, no one has time for your negativity. It's a beautiful day, and we have places to be."

Mike and Will burst out laughing, and Lucas sulked all the way outside until they reached their bikes.

"Oh uh – mind if we stop at Benny's on the way? I need a donut or three, since you guys ate all my wafers," Dustin said, giving them his best toothy grin.

"I cannot believe – there's half a pack left!" Lucas was yelling now.

"Yeah, there's half a pack... inside. What will fuel me in the meantime, and for the way back?"

But Lucas already had his head in his hands, his elbows resting on his handlebars.

"Let's do it – I could use a coffee," Will said, and Dustin perked up.

Will had picked up a coffee habit from Jonathan, after spending a few early mornings a week in the summer helping him on odd jobs around town.

"See? There's the positivity I was looking for. First stop, Benny's," Dustin announced.

They headed off, Lucas cursing under his breath.

Benny's Diner was packed with the usual weekend breakfast crowd, and the line at the to-go counter was pretty long. The place was filled with noisy chatter, the air thick with the smell of coffee and fried onions.

They shuffled inside, and Lucas groaned. "Dustin really, you want to wait in this?"

"Hey, it's not just me," Dustin said, pointing at Will.

Will just shrugged. They squished into the line, people shuffling past them every few minutes to get to the door.

"Oh, hey," Will said after a moment looking across the diner, "Is that..."

"Eleven," Dustin finished.

Mike shoved him in the ribs with his elbow. "Keep your voice down! That's not what she goes by, remember?"

"Geez Mike, I just – oh, she's looking over here," Dustin said.

Mike felt nervous all of a sudden. "What?"

"Oh yep, she saw us – we should wave, I'm waving, guys – Hi, Eleven!" Dustin said, now at a whisper.

Mike looked behind him. El was sitting at a booth near the window, the Chief across from her. She caught Mike's eyes and gave him a small wave. Mike returned it, which made the Chief turn to look. That steely glare from the parking lot returned the instant he saw Mike.

"You should go say Hi," Will said, nudging his arm.

Mike turned back to his friends. "By myself?"

"Will and I are getting something, so..." Dustin said, looking at Lucas.

Lucas looked annoyed. "Not a chance."

Mike sighed. He squeezed through the line, maneuvering around the cluster of tables and narrowly dodging a waiter carrying a full tray of steaming coffee mugs. *Smooth, Wheeler.*

He finally reached their table, relieved to see that El was smiling at

him. "Hi Mike!"

"Hey... Jane," he said, careful not to let her nickname slip. He glanced at the Chief. *Yep, he's still glaring – good, that's great.* Even dressed in a plaid shirt and jeans, sans hat, he was intimidating.

Summoning up what courage he could find, Mike extended his hand. "Hi, I'm Mike Wh-"

"Wheeler, yeah, I know. Karen and Ted's boy."

He didn't frame it as a question, so Mike wasn't sure what to say.

"Yeah that's uh – that's me," he offered lamely. He looked at El, who was frowning at the Chief.

The *Hawkins Post* was strewn across the table, and he saw that the Chief was working on the crossword. There were just a few spaces left, and Mike's eyes landed on one of the clues: *Beloved Captain*.

"Kirk," Mike said, pointing at the corresponding blank spot.

"What?" The Chief said, studying him with those brooding eyes.

"Seventeen down – the answer is Kirk."

The Chief still said nothing. *Maybe he needs clarification*, Mike thought. "Captain Kirk! You know, *Star Trek*?"

"Yeah, thanks kid," the Chief deadpanned. Mike could see the pencil tucked behind his ear, but the Chief didn't make a move to fill in the answer.

El was still frowning at him. "Dad," she said, a pleading look in her eyes.

She turned back to Mike. "What are you doing here?"

"Oh um, Dustin wanted donuts – of course. And Will's getting a coffee. We're just on our way to the used bookstore over on Main, to look for something for the independent study in English," he told her.

"Oh," she said.

"Do you have to do one too?"

"I'm not sure... I still have to figure out some stuff about my classes," she replied.

"Right," Mike said. She looked disappointed. "You should come with us!" he blurted. 'Even if you don't need anything, it's a pretty cool place just to look around."

El nodded at Mike, the smile back on her face. She turned to the Chief, who finally took his eyes off Mike. "How will you get there?" he asked El.

"Oh, you can ride with us," Mike offered.

The Chief looked back at him again, frowning. "You got a car, Wheeler?"

No Sir, we prefer to bike - you know, being massive nerds and all.

They were all at least a few months away from being eligible for learner's permits, but he knew the fact that they still biked everywhere was pretty lame. None of them said it out loud, but they all secretly loved it – so it would probably stay that way for a while.

"No uh... we're just on our bikes," he said, "But two people can fit on the seat." *Oh, good God – smooth, Wheeler.*

Looking somehow even more unimpressed, the Chief turned back to El. "I can pick you up back here in a little while."

"Oh, I can bike her home," Mike offered, jumping at the chance to redeem himself.

"Yeah Dad, I can-"

The Chief held a hand up, silencing them both. "I'll pick you up back here." It was the kind of tone you didn't dare argue with.

"Great well um, I'll go tell the guys!" Mike said, desperate to get away

from the Chief's glare.

He hurried back over to the counter to find his friends waiting, Dustin already chowing down on one of his donuts. He could tell they'd watched the whole thing and were trying to hide their laughter.

"Let me guess, you invited her to the book store," Lucas said.

Mike just nodded.

Will stuck his hand out in front of Dustin, who groaned and fished into his pocket. He pulled out a crumpled dollar bill and reluctantly gave it to Will.

Will grinned. "Saint Michael strikes again."

The ride from Benny's to the bookstore was pretty much a straight shot along the main road to downtown. But for once, Mike found himself wishing there were some bends in the road or a break in the terrain.

Not because he wanted the challenge, but so he'd have something to focus on other than the feeling of El pressed up against him, her hands clutching the front of his jacket.

With the two of them on his bike it was a pretty snug fit. Him and his friends used to pair off and ride double, playing some stupid game where the first team to dismount the other from the seat were the winners. But they hadn't done that in forever, and Mike had grown considerably since – meaning El kept shifting forward and tightening her grip.

She's just trying to stay on, he kept telling himself – which was true. So why was he being such a weirdo about it?

It didn't help that she was so quiet back there. She was probably wondering what the hell she'd gotten herself into.

Finally, the bookstore came into view. His friends were up ahead, and Mike helped El off the bike. He guided it between them on the

sidewalk.

"Sorry about that," he said.

She put a hand on the bike frame, helping him steer it along. "It's okay," she said, "I liked it."

He was blushing, again. They left his bike next to the others and headed inside.

There were only three mildly cool things in Hawkins: the record store, the drive-in (which was only open in the summertime), and in Mike's opinion, this bookstore. It was a decently sized space, packed to the hilt with mismatched bookshelves. There was something eccentric about it, too; old clocks hung on every free inch of wall space, and globes of varying sizes rested atop some of the many piles of books.

Mike saw Lucas digging through a stack of comics near the cash register. Will and Dustin were nearby, poring over the list they'd been given of recommended novels.

He noticed El wasn't at his side anymore, and he spotted her standing next to a bookshelf. She was gazing up at it, walking along slowly and running her hand across the spines. She seemed mesmerized.

He walked over to the guys and peered over Will's shoulder at the list.

"How was your bike ride?" Dustin asked, grinning at him.

"Fine," Mike said, avoiding his eyes.

"Let's just look over in 'Classics', they're bound to have a bunch of these," Will said.

The genres were painted on the front of each shelf, and as they searched, Mike watched El out of the corner of his eye. She was still walking along, just reaching the 'Horror/Sci-Fi' section.

She took a book down and studied its cover, and he found himself wondering what it was. His friends were already a few steps ahead of

him, so he darted over to her. She didn't look up. Mike leaned over to read the title; it was Stephen King's *Christine*.

"Find something?" He asked, and El looked up, startled.

"Maybe... it looks interesting," she said.

"Are you a fan of the King?" Mike for sure was – the biggest out of anyone he knew.

El just frowned.

"Ever read anything by him?"

She shook her head.

"Well then, don't start with *Christine*," Mike said, stepping beside her to look at what was on the shelf. "It's a good one, don't get me wrong, but definitely not his best stuff. Here, let me..." he scanned the other King titles, finally landing on the one he wanted.

"Here – this is the one you gotta read," he said, handing El a worn-in copy of *Firestarter*.

She took it from him, tracing the cover in the same intent way she just had with *Christine*.

"This one is my favourite so far - I read it this summer. It's about these people with special powers – well, abilities," Mike said, watching her. "The main guy has this mind domination thing, and his wife has telekinesis."

At that, El looked up from the cover. Her eyes searched Mike's face, suddenly paying full attention to his words.

"She can do things with her mind," Mike continued, a little startled. "And so can the daughter – she can start fires just by thinking about it. Hence the title."

That fearful look was back in El's eyes, and Mike wasn't sure why. She was so engrossed in the book just a moment ago.

"But it's not real, right?"

"What, telekinesis and stuff? Well, no – I mean, it's never been proven or anything, so maybe it is, who knows. I think if anything, scientifically–"

"No, the story. Is it real?"

"Oh!" Mike replied, feeling stupid. "No, it's fiction. Science fiction, actually – that's the proper name for it."

She made a move to put it back on the shelf but Mike placed a hand on her arm, stopping her. "You're not going to get it?"

Her next words were quiet, timid. "No, I don't think so." She shrugged his hand off and shoved the book back in place.

"Alright, fair – then at least get *The Dead Zone*. I mean if you're going to do the King justice..."

But she was already moving ahead of him, and he could see she wasn't listening. What just happened?

Confused, he headed back over to the Classics section, only to find Will and Dustin arguing over a copy of *The Great Gatsby*.

He didn't bother getting involved and started looking through the shelves, trying to distract himself from the strange interaction with El.

What could be so upsetting about a brief plot summary of *Firestarter*? If anything, it was one of King's milder novels – and she was intrigued by *Christine*, which in his opinion was way creepier.

In an effort to push the thoughts away, he began reading titles out loud, murmuring them to himself as he skimmed along.

"*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Wuthering Heights*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Sound and the Fury*... the cafeteria."

The cafeteria.

He thought about that strange pull he felt when El touched his ribcage. He'd noticed it at the time but didn't have a second to think about it – mainly because he was flustered after James shoved him, not to mention nervous about the whole lunchtime encounter.

But now that split second became magnified in his head and he struggled to piece it together. His first reaction was that maybe she was stronger than she looked, and had simply kept him from falling. Mike was clumsy, and she could easily have much better reflexes than him.

But that wasn't just a light shove from James; he'd used his whole arm to push Mike out of the way. And since it was completely unexpected, Mike had pitched to the side with what he knew was a lot of force.

And she had just... stopped him. He tried to rationalize it, hearing Lucas's voice in his head: That's just crazy talk. But now that the thought was there, he couldn't make it go away. Plus, it seemed to explain why she got so weirded out just now.

No way, Mike kept thinking, *that stuff isn't real*. But wasn't that what she asked? Did she think it was real because she *knew* it was real? *It's never been proven*, he had told her.

But what if it had - and he'd been the one to witness it?

5. Chapter 5

After dropping El off at Benny's – to a waiting, scowling Chief Hopper – the gang headed for Mike's house; the default hangout spot when they weren't sure what else to do.

Mike had been quiet since leaving the store, his mind racing with ideas about El and telekinesis and Firestarter and every ridiculous theory in between. She hadn't said anything on the ride back to the diner, and only gave a mumbled 'Goodbye' when she got off his bike.

Noticing the change in Mike's demeanor, Will dropped back a little until he and Mike were side by side.

"What's going on up there?" he asked.

It was a line he'd used many times, a way to ask what Mike was thinking about. But since he'd grown so tall in past last year, 'up there' had become quite literal – now, the phrase was something of an inside joke between the two.

It usually made Mike laugh, but this time he only shrugged. Will just waited patiently, which worked every time.

"I dunno, just El," Mike finally offered. "She's...interesting."

"And that's a bad thing?"

"You know what I mean," Mike grumbled.

"Well there's some mystery there, that's for sure."

They biked on in silence for a minute before Will added, "She likes you."

Mike frowned, glancing sideways at him. "What?"

"I know you'll just argue with whatever I say," Will replied, laughing to himself. "But I dunno... I can just tell," he said, his eyes on the road.

Mike shook his head. "Yeah well, I'm probably one of the few people at school that's been nice to her or invited her anywhere, so... that's all it is."

"Point taken. And maybe you're right," Will said. He sped up a little then, pedaling just ahead of Mike.

"But you didn't see her face when she spotted you at Benny's," he called over his shoulder.

Mike stood next to his Mom at the sink, drying the dishes after Sunday night dinner – his least favorite chore. It was mainly because his Mom took forever to wash, carefully inspecting each dish when it came out of the soapy water. Nancy was better at tolerating it; she and his Mom always had a lot to talk about. With Mike, the after-dinner cleanup was decidedly more silent.

But he'd been thinking about El nonstop since yesterday and was curious if his Mom knew anything about her, like Dustin's had. A part of him was hesitant because he knew that at the mention of a girl, she would ask a million questions – which was embarrassing because it proved how little the topic of Mike and girls came up.

As he watched her examine a serving dish for stains, the frustrating mix of boredom and curiosity took over.

"So uh... I ended up meeting the Chief's daughter," he said in what he hoped was a nonchalant tone.

"Oh yeah?" his Mom replied, still focused on the dish.

Smooth, alright – no girlfriend questions yet.

"Yeah, ran into her one day after AV club."

"Is she a nice girl?"

Here we go.

"I'm not sure... she seems shy."

"Well she's the new girl, Michael. She's just nervous." She looked up from the sink and raised her eyebrows at him. "I hope you were nice to her." Mike resisted the urge to roll his eyes. If Karen Wheeler had a famous, age-old, tried-and-true line, it was that – *I hope you were nice.*

He went for his usual response. "Mom, come on, I'm always nice."

She looked at him for a moment before turning back to the sink.

"Well good, because that poor girl hasn't had it easy."

"No?" he said, doing his best to sound casual.

"With all the talking that goes on around here? Moving somewhere new is hard enough as is, but Hawkins is a different story."

"What do people say about her?"

She began to scrub a large saucepan. "Oh, well rumors are rumors Michael, you know that. But I think the Chief took her away from a pretty bad home life – abuse, neglect, awful stuff." She paused her scrubbing for a moment. "The poor thing," she said quietly.

Mike continued drying, mulling this over. He'd guessed as much – he assumed most adoptions happened because of some set of difficult circumstances. But still, hearing that about El gave him an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Who knows how it all came about. But he doesn't talk about her much, from what I know," his Mom continued. "He's very protective. It makes sense, after..."

"His daughter?"

She nodded, and Mike could see tears welling up in her eyes. He knew she was thinking of Holly; the Chief's girl had been about her age when she died. "Losing a child... that's not something you ever recover from."

Mike thought about the Chief's ever-present scowl, the way he'd insisted on picking El up from Benny's. After that came an image of El – the frightened look in her large brown eyes when she'd asked: *But*

it's not real, is it?

Amidst all the thoughts Mike had about El over the weekend, the one he hadn't really considered until just after 11 a.m. on Monday was what would happen at lunchtime. Like Will said, she'd had the weekend to decide if she wanted to keep sitting with them or not – but Mike had no way of knowing what that decision would be until the moment came. Which was soon.

He half expected to see her standing in the cafeteria doorway looking for him like last time, but when he arrived she wasn't there. He waited, thinking maybe she was late. But after a few minutes she still didn't show.

Lucas and Will were already seated at their table, and he tried to hide his disappointment as he sat down.

"Where's your bookstore buddy?" Lucas asked, but Mike just shrugged in response. He noticed Will eyeing him, but he didn't look up.

Dustin arrived and convinced them all to bring their lunches outside – which they reluctantly did. Dustin was a good convincer, especially when he wouldn't stop whining about it being, "The last – *I swear* – the last warm day of the year."

It turned out to be a good thing, because the sun and fresh air and noisy chatter in the school's center quad made Mike feel a little better. By the end of the lunch period, he'd stopped looking around for El every few minutes.

And by the end of the day, he'd managed to shove the thoughts to the back of his mind – where they were still uneasy, but manageable.

He was heading for the doors to the parking lot, chanting *Don't look for her don't look for her stop looking for her* in his head when – of course – he saw her. She was at her locker, ready to close it, when they caught eyes.

Everything in him said to keep going, that she had obviously decided she didn't want to talk to him or sit with him at lunch or be friends at

all. But another part – the part that liked to ramble and tell Chief Hopper what his crossword answers were – couldn't help it. "Hi!" he said, stopping in front of her.

"Hi Mike," she said, looking away. He could sense that the same strange quiet that had taken hold of her at the book store was still there.

He still couldn't help it. "I didn't see – I uh, waited for you at lunch today." *Waited for you? Good God.*

"Mike... you're – thank you," she stammered. "But you don't have to... talk to me, or anything."

"What?"

"Or invite me places."

What the hell is she talking about?

"I-I know that," he said, unsure of where this was going.

"Thank you for being kind," she said, still not meeting his eyes. "But you have your friends. You don't have to... feel bad for me, or – anything like that."

Mike was at a loss for words, his eyes searching her face. Had it all come across that way, that he was just talking to her out of pity? At first he had felt bad, knowing why she'd been hiding out in the AV room. But from then on it hadn't been because of obligation at all. He was intrigued by her, had looked forward to any chance to see or get to talk to her.

His friends teased him about pulling a Saint Michael move at Benny's, but if he was being honest, he had it in his head to invite her to the bookstore as soon as he walked over to that table. He'd never really understood the meaning of being drawn to someone until her – El.

He scrambled to put words together. "El – please don't think that. It's not – I wouldn't –" he sighed, and she finally met his eyes again. "I invited you to eat with us, and to the bookstore because I wanted to. Not because of anything else, okay?"

The hallways were almost empty, the last of the students filing out for the day. El shut her locker. "Okay," she said. Mike felt a little relieved, but he wasn't sure if she really believed him.

"Is your Dad picking you up?" he asked, cautious.

"No, he works the dinner shift on Mondays."

"So how are you getting home?"

"Oh... I usually just wait around here, or go to Benny's until he's done," she replied, sliding her jean jacket on.

"You want a ride?"

El frowned at him. "You mean on your bike?"

"Yeah, I've got—" he began, but stopped when he saw her smiling. He grinned. "Are you making fun of me?"

She laughed, and then Mike was finally at ease.

"Well if you're too good for a bike seat I don't know if we can be friends, El," he teased.

She kept laughing and Mike just kept grinning at her like an idiot.

"Alright," she said. "But are you sure? It's kind of far."

"As long as you're okay with it."

She was. And while their last bike ride had been silent, this time it was anything but. It started when they passed the movie theatre and Mike asked El if she'd ever seen *Aliens* and she said no. He launched into a riveting plot summary, which lead to him rattling through a list of his all-time favorite movies – *E.T.*, *Star Wars*, *Jaws* – all of which she hadn't seen either. That elicited a hysterical reaction from Mike that made El laugh uncontrollably.

"We have to watch them all," he told her, not caring how nervous that idea made him. "I cannot associate with anyone who hasn't seen the greatest trifecta of cinematic gold known to humankind."

"Okay," she said, still laughing, "We will."

Then she asked him about his family, if he had a brother or sister, and she was fascinated to hear that he had two sisters and that one was at college – she wanted to know all about that. So he told her, explaining everything about Nancy and Jonathan, and how Holly was at that phase where everything scared her, and how he had to help out with her a lot now because Nancy wasn't there.

He talked and she leaned in close to him, her chin resting up near his shoulder so she could hear him over the rush of the wind. It wasn't the ideal setup for talking, but somehow it felt easier than any conversation Mike could ever remember having. There was something about the way she listened that reduced the sound of car horns and gravel under his tires to a low background hum until it was just them – El intent on hearing him and Mike intent on telling her whatever came to mind.

Years or seconds could've passed when they pulled up to the cabin – a cliché, Mike knew, but it was entirely the truth. He was breathless from the pedaling and the talking and the feeling of El close to him.

The cabin was situated about a quarter mile into a wooded area, not too far off the beaten track but definitely a place you'd get lost looking for if you didn't know which worn-in trail to follow. It was a little rundown from what Mike could tell, but had a rustic kind of look that would appeal to anyone who needed to escape for a little bit.

He looked over at El, who was brushing her fingers through her soft brown curls, putting them back in place. He didn't want to go home in the slightest.

Luckily she seemed to sense that. "Come inside?"

Mike nodded, not trusting his voice at the moment. He carried his bike up the steps and left it on the wide front porch.

The cabin was essentially one large room, with a hallway off in the far corner where Mike thought the bedrooms must be. The kitchen

was tucked into a nook behind a couch and small television, and the walls and floor were all made of the same dark wood. The furniture was old, and Mike noticed a bunch of milk crates full of vinyl records shoved into the corner beside the door.

"Simple," El said as he took everything in, "But... home."

"It's nice! Cozy," Mike told her.

"Cozy?"

Mike blushed. "Yeah like... warm. You know, comforting."

"You're the first guest," she said, sliding her shoes off.

Mike did the same. "Really?" She nodded.

Mike began drifting around the living room and El stood beside the couch, watching him. He came up to a small table by the window that was covered in books, most of them open and facedown. He studied the titles – *Anne of Green Gables*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Brave New World*. There were a few encyclopedias, and some magazines that looked dated.

"Are you reading all this?" Mike asked.

"Sort of."

Mike picked up one of the open books and flipped through, noticing pencil marks across most of the pages.

"I didn't really go to school much before coming here," El said. "So I'm trying to catch up, with books... it helps."

Mike nodded, still studying the lines. Her comment about not going to school peaked his curiosity, and there were questions on his mind but he held back. He placed the book back down after a moment and noticed something resting on the windowsill behind the table. It was a paper crane, like the one she'd left for him that day in the AV room.

He picked it up and turned to her. "Is this your signature or something?"

She laughed and came to stand in front of him, taking it out of his palm.

"Kind of. When I first came here and my Dad and I were still... getting used to each other, sometimes we would fight. Nothing bad just – rules and everything... we saw some things differently." Mike studied her as she traced her fingers over the edges of the paper.

"I didn't really know how to say sorry. Or I mean I did but... it was hard for me. So I'd make him these and leave them around – on his nightstand, on the sink. Sometimes with drawings too." She moved past Mike to place it back on the windowsill. "He likes them, I think. He keeps them all."

"Can you show me how to make one?" Mike asked, the words leaving his mouth just as the idea struck him.

El looked confused, but then she smiled and headed over to the hallway, disappearing for a moment. She came back carrying a roll of blue paper under her arm and a pair of scissors. Mike followed her to the living room carpet, where she sat with her legs crossed and rolled a big section of paper out in front of them.

"Alright, so it involves a lot of folding."

"Uh-oh."

She laughed. "You'll be fine."

And then she started to explain, and it was the first time Mike heard her speak without a trace of shyness in her voice. There was something captivating about watching her talk about something she loved; she gestured excitedly and frowned in concentration at the more difficult moments. Mike tried his best to pay attention, but he couldn't get over the way her eyes lit up, how steady her hands were and how calming her voice was. Pay attention focus focus focus.

In the end hers came out perfect, and Mike's looked like a sad imitation of a paper airplane. But it was okay because it made El laugh.

"Told you," he said, laughing with her.

"You'll get better."

Mike still didn't want to leave, but the light was starting to fade outside and he definitely didn't want to bike out of these woods in the dark.

El helped him carry his bike down the porch, but as he started to get on it she grabbed his arm, stopping him. "Mike... wait."

He turned back to her, his heart suddenly racing. She closed the space between them and wrapped her arms around his waist, hugging him close.

It took him a second to gather himself, but then he held her back, his arms encircling her shoulders.

"Thank you," she said in that timid voice, "For being kind."

He didn't – he couldn't – think of anything to say so he just hugged her tighter. He was racking his brain for a response that wouldn't seem totally lame when the roar of an engine sounded into the quiet evening. A pair of headlights flashed and nearly blinded Mike. The Chief.

El sprung back from him and Mike nearly toppled over. They weren't doing anything wrong, but the Chief didn't seem to be a huge fan of Mike for whatever reason. This would not look good.

The Chief got out of the truck and walked over to them, his hands on his hips. "Wheeler," he said, in a voice that to Mike also meant – Your ass is grass, Wheeler.

"Hello Sir – uh – Chief, hi." Smooth, Wheeler.

"Hey Dad, how was your day?" El said, walking over to him. When he didn't respond she stopped, glancing desperately at Mike.

"Mike gave me a ride – on his bike. I knew you were working late, so..."

But the Chief was still frowning at Mike and it was no use. After an

agonizing minute, he finally spoke. "You want a ride home, kid?"

Mike had been preparing for a grade-A beating, so it took him a moment to process what the Chief had just said. "Uh... no, it's alright, I was gonna bike."

"It gets dark faster than you think out here," the Chief said. "Come on, I can throw that thing in the truck."

Mike was about to protest but the Chief was already in front of him, lifting the bike in the air like it was a piece of scrap paper. Mike looked back at El, but she was studying the ground. The Chief was already slamming the trunk shut.

"I'll see you tomorrow, okay?" he told her quietly. She nodded.

Mike climbed into the passenger's seat of the Blazer, taking in the smell of fresh cigarette smoke. The engine roared as they pulled away from the cabin, but it felt like nothing compared to the sound of Mike's heart thudding in his ears.

The Chief strummed his fingers along the steering wheel to whatever song was on the radio – Mike didn't recognize it. A few minutes passed and Mike started to feel the slightest bit of relief, thinking maybe he'd make it out of the car alive.

But then the Chief spoke. "You know kid, she tells me everything."

Is that a threat? It didn't seem like a question, and Mike didn't know what to say.

"She hasn't really had the chance to make friends," the Chief continued. "She started late, and she's in and out of different classes... she's smart as hell, but a little behind with the school stuff."

Again, it didn't feel like something Mike could respond to so he didn't. He looked straight ahead at the road instead; they were reaching the edge of the suburb that Mike's house was in.

"Listen, Wheeler – there are some things... You've been nice to her, and that's fine. But if you're trying to capitalize on the fact that she's new and doesn't–"

"What!?" Mike blurted. He cringed – it sounded much angrier than he'd intended. He tried to calm his voice down. "Sir – Chief – it's not like that," he said, taking a breath. "Look, my friends and I aren't exactly the most popular people at Hawkins, alright?"

Mike wasn't sure if that made sense, but the Chief seemed to be mulling it over. He steered the Blazer onto Mike's street.

"I'm not taking advantage – I wouldn't do that to El," Mike said. *Oh no, oh God* – he'd let her nickname slip. They pulled up outside his house and Mike made a move to open the door, sure that he'd just sealed the fate of his demise.

But a firm, cold hand grabbed his arm. "El?"

The thudding in Mike's ears was deafening now. "Yeah uh – she – she told us her real name. And we made a nickname for her," Mike said, knowing it would only make matters worse.

"We?" the Chief echoed. *Oh God oh no oh God.*

"My friends and I... Lucas, Will and Dustin." *Great, so their fates are sealed too – they're all dead, we're all dead.*

The Chief let go of his arm but Mike was still frozen, his hand hovering above the handle. "She didn't tell me that," he grumbled, more to himself than to Mike.

"I thought she told you everything."

Mike risked a glance at the Chief, but he was looking straight ahead, his hands on the steering wheel.

"She told me that you knew her real name," he said in a measured tone. "But she didn't say anything about the nickname."

Mike had been bracing himself for a blow to the head, but at that he sat up, surprised.

He didn't want to risk anything by speaking, so he opened the car door and carefully got out. The Chief did too, popping the trunk and hauling Mike's bike out onto the pavement.

"Thanks for the ride," Mike said, his heart still thudding away.

"No problem, kid." There was a pause, and then he walked back around the Blazer and got in, peeling away fast enough that the tires screeched loudly on the pavement.

Mike headed into his garage, placing his bike in its usual spot. He stood there for a moment, watching the sun sink lower into the sky.

That car ride had given him a lot to think about, but right now he could think of only one thing.

In the book he'd picked up at El's house – a hardcover copy of *Brave New World* – the page he'd flipped to was full of pencil marks, mostly underlined sentences. But one passage had writing in the margins beside it, a scrawl he recognized as El's.

Beside the sentence: "One believes things because one has been conditioned to believe them" were two words, written clearly enough so that they couldn't be mistaken: *the lab*.

6. Chapter 6

Mike's room was cloaked in full darkness. It was just after midnight and not even a sliver of moonlight came in through the window, the way it did on other nights. There was no reason to be awake, but he was. Wide awake.

If he thought about those two words on their own – *the lab* – the potential for their meaning was nearly impossible to narrow down. But if he thought about them in conjunction with the cafeteria and *Firestarter*, they began to feel like a starting point; like the tip of an iceberg he still wasn't even sure existed.

What about that sentence made El want to circle it, want to pause and write *the lab* beside it? *One believes things because one has been conditioned to believe them.* Had she been conditioned to believe things that turned out to be wrong? For some reason Mike was sure it had nothing to do with the Chief. If he did rescue her from an abusive home, lying or feeding her false information was probably not in his best interest. As he'd told Mike, "She's smart as hell."

Smart as hell, but never went to school much. So who conditioned the things she believed?

The thought put Mike on edge, so he tried to move past it. *Maybe she meant it as a metaphor, like the lab is this figurative place we're all in at some point, learning what to believe or not.* But that felt too abstract. He had the persistent thought that it was intentional, that she put it there as a reference to a specific situation.

It was the kind of thing he needed to talk through with someone – his friends, or maybe just Will. But just like what happened at the bookstore, Mike's instinct was to keep it to himself; both because he knew it would sound crazy, and because in some way it felt like a secret. His friends didn't keep secrets from each other. They had their private lives, but something like this... they'd be mad if they knew he'd chosen not to say anything.

And there was another reason, one that he couldn't fully explain, even to himself. He wanted to protect El. Not because she was in any

kind of danger – that he knew of – but because he didn't want his friends, or anyone, to look at her differently. He remembered how Lucas had said '*The crazy one?*' when he told them about finding out who El was.

Though he knew Lucas didn't really mean it, Mike didn't want to make things harder for El than they'd already been. From what she said at her locker, he knew that she didn't want his pity – or in this case his protection. Still, something in him felt compelled to keep her from any more harm, from anyone finding out about things she might not want them to know, or thinking she was crazy or weird.

Because she wasn't, at all. She was interesting and kind and she listened and Mike had the strong sense that he'd only scratched the surface – and he wanted to know more. Not just things about her, not what secrets she might be keeping, but *her*.

In that desire lay a question that stood out among the tangled web of his thoughts – *Will she let me?* Mike was afraid of the answer. Afraid, because the answer might be no.

On Thursday at AV club, Lucas, Will, and Mike sat waiting – as routine would have it – for Dustin. But Mike was grateful to just be with his friends, in their makeshift sanctuary. He knew he'd been distant since the weekend, and was determined not to let that happen during these precious couple of hours.

Lucas was telling them a story about how his little sister, Erica, had cut out pieces from one of his comics for some kind of collage involving Rob Lowe. He got progressively angrier as the story went on, and Mike and Will were howling with laughter when the door flung open and Dustin barged into the room, panting.

"Guys, I have news that might change the course of our lives."

The three of them gave each other knowing looks – that was a popular line of Dustin's, used way too often for ridiculous things that were in no way going to change the course of anyone's lives.

It was popular for things like: "The cafeteria switched out the regular

chocolate ice cream for triple chocolate again!" or, "Benny's is putting cheesy hash browns back on the menu." Food was a popular topic of conversation with Dustin. He'd outgrown his childhood pudginess, but never lost that ravenous appetite.

"What, did Nilla wafers get discontinued?" Lucas asked.

Dustin was still catching his breath, but he glared at Lucas. "One day the nuclear war will break out, and I'll be the first one to warn you guys and you'll all be screwed, because you don't listen to me," he huffed.

"I won't, Dustin, I'll listen to you," Will said, "Because I know when it's time to go into hiding, your bunker will be full of snacks." Lucas and Mike roared with laughter, and Dustin flipped them all the finger.

"For your information," he said, sliding into his usual seat and flinging his backpack on the table. "This is something that's of interest to all of us."

He could sense them listening then, so he continued. "You know the Fall Drive-In?" There was a collective groan, and Dustin's face fell.

Ace's Drive-In, one of the few cool places in Hawkins, was usually only open in the summertime. But for the past three years, it had remained open later and later into the fall; there were rumors that the owner was going bankrupt and needed the cash. Fall Drive-In was an annual event born out of this.

It was the final send off for the season, a big event (for Hawkins) with outdoor food stands, lights, and huge speakers so even people without a car could attend. It was a final bid to garner the money needed to run the place for the next summer, and the turnout was always pretty good.

It was supposedly a good time, but Mike and his friends had never gone. The movies they'd played – *Annie*, *The Breakfast Club*, and *Risky Business* – weren't their kind of films. Plus, it was known to be an excuse for teenagers to drink and find their way into backseats of cars; things they weren't exactly regular participants in.

"Okay okay, I know it's been lame the past few years but... I saw the ad outside in the quad," Dustin said, and his face lit up again. "You'll never guess what they're playing."

"*Pretty in Pink?*" Lucas said, leaning back with his arms crossed.

"You wish," Dustin retorted. "No, guys it's this Saturday and... they're doing a double feature. *The Empire Strikes Back*—" there was a collective gasp. "*And Return of the Jedi!*!"

Lucas nearly sprung out of his chair, and Mike and Will turned to each other. "Are you serious? Please tell me you're serious," Mike said.

"No word of a lie."

At that, they all cheered, sending around high-fives and clapping Dustin on the back. It took a moment for them to settle down.

"I mean, it doesn't really make sense without the first movie in the lineup but – man, I can't believe they're going to play something actually cool," Will said.

"We have to go," Lucas said.

Dustin reached over to give Mike's arm a playful shove. "You gonna bring your lady friend?"

Mike shirked away from him. "*Lady friend?* Dustin, are you serious?"

"What! I knew you'd freak out if I said girlfriend."

"El's not my girlfriend!"

Dustin raised his eyebrows. "But she's your *lady friend*?"

"No! She's just... we're friends. We're all friends with her," Mike said, trying to temper his voice.

Though he obviously knew El the best so far, she'd slowly become closer with the rest of the boys. She sat with them at lunch on most days, and the awkwardness had faded away; she seemed more

comfortable around them, always laughing at Dustin's jokes and making conversation with Will and Lucas. Her and Will seemed to connect especially well.

"True," Dustin replied. "But none of us make googly eyes at her, which is why she gets the special definition of lady friend for you."

"Dustin!" Mike said, nearly shouting now. "*Googly eyes!*? What are we, in fourth grade?"

Lucas cut in then. "Mike, come on – you'd have to be an idiot not to see it."

"See what?"

Lucas rolled his eyes, letting out an exasperated sigh. "Why are you so freaked out, man? It's okay if you like her."

"Yeah Mike," Will said. Dustin was nodding.

Mike was beyond embarrassed. He thought his distance over the past week meant his friends wouldn't have had the chance to notice anything. And if they did, he thought it would be how weird and quiet he was acting – not his admittedly obvious feelings for El. He looked up at their faces. There was no hiding in this Party, that was for sure.

But he couldn't make himself say the words out loud, so he instead he went with: "I went to her house on Monday."

They were understandably shocked. "Her house? Like... the Chief's house?" Lucas asked, a tinge of fear in his voice.

Mike nodded. He proceeded to explain everything about the bike ride on Monday, the cabin, the paper cranes, and the car ride home with the Chief in which he thought for sure he was dead meat. He left out the part about the books and the lab, but it still felt good to talk about it all, to hear them laugh and gasp in surprise and commiserate over why the Chief seemed to hate him.

"Well, first of all, she's in love with you," Dustin said. Mike tried to interrupt, but Dustin held a finger up to silence him. "Second of all,

you have to invite her to the drive-in."

Mike also told them about how she'd never seen any of their favorite movies, which they were just as incredulous over as he had been.

"Yeah, I just feel bad that we don't have a car," Lucas said.

Mike frowned. "But we don't need one – don't they bring out those big speakers?"

"No!" Lucas exclaimed, covering his face with both hands. "God, you're so dense sometimes," he muttered. "I feel bad because you and your lady friend won't have access to a backseat, you dipshit!" Mike flushed a deep red and Dustin and Will burst into laughter. He tried to protest, but it was no use.

Though he felt mildly embarrassed for the rest of AV club, Mike also felt an all-encompassing sense of relief. His friends didn't know everything about El, but they knew a little more – and they were accepting of her. That was all that mattered to him; that was enough to ease some of his fears.

When it came time to leave, they gathered up their things and waited as Mike fiddled with the key ring. They were all talking excitedly about the drive-in, so when he flung the door open, it took him a second to register that El was standing there.

She was leaning against the wall opposite the door, her arms crossed. There was a piece of paper tucked under one arm, and she was smiling. She's always smiling at you, Will had said when they were teasing him earlier.

"If it isn't the coolest four-person club at Hawkins," El said. It was a phrase Mike had used a few times around her, a joke he often made about AV club. Hearing her say it made him smile.

"You're damn right it is," Dustin said, brushing past Mike. "What's up, El?"

"Not a lot," she said, moving away from the wall.

They all chatted for a few minutes before Dustin turned to Will and Lucas. "Alright boys, I'm out," he said, "Hunger calls. Sorry, Mike."

Mike mumbled a "No worries," in response, secretly happy that he would get a chance to be alone with El – which he hadn't been since Monday, since she'd hugged him close and said Thank you for being kind.

His friends hurried off down the hall, and he stepped towards El. She lifted the paper she was holding out from under her arm, offering it to Mike. He grabbed it, scanning over the words *FALL DRIVE-IN: DOUBLE FEATURE* at the top, with *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi* listed below. Dustin hadn't been lying.

Mike looked back up at El. "These are the movies you wanted me to watch, right?" she asked.

Mike smiled. He'd been running through ways to ask her to come with them for the last half hour of AV club, but she was already two steps ahead.

"Yep, you got it," he said. "So you have to come with us." *Have to? Good God.* "I mean – I mean you don't have to, only if – only if you want to, you don't have to do anyth–"

She reached out and placed a hand on his arm, and he stopped. "I definitely want to."

"Cool," Mike said, trying calm his nerves. "Is your Dad working late again?"

She nodded. "Well, I just have to drop off these keys. Then I can..." he trailed off, realizing he was again about to assume something.

But again, she was two steps ahead. "Bike me home?" she said, smiling up at him.

It was the first weekend of October, but September's warm spell still hovered over Hawkins. Even though it was dark by the time Fall Drive-In got underway, it was comfortable enough to be outside in some warm clothes. Which was good, because Mike and his friends

didn't have the luxury of a car – they were sprawled out on the drive-in's lawn in front of all the vehicles – "Like the rest of the plebeians," Dustin had said.

Each of the boys brought sleeping bags, and they spread them all out to form a big square. Dustin, Lucas and Will sat side-by-side; Mike knew that was intentional so that him and El would have to sit behind them, which they did.

There were at least a few hundred people there, about half of them sitting on the lawn. The giant screen had stage lights all around it, and two big speakers on either side. A few small concession stands sat off to one side and people kept passing by, their arms full of overflowing bags of popcorn.

Mike glanced over at El, who was listening intently as Dustin gave her a synopsis of the first *Star Wars* film. Did she want popcorn? Should he offer to buy her some? Would she be offended? Did she even *like* popcorn? He despaired at the fact that he didn't even know the answer to that.

She was dressed in her usual faded jeans and a large grey hoodie with *HAWKINS P.D.* written across the front in navy blue letters. He was disappointed at this; he'd imagined that she might get cold, and then he'd get to offer her his sweater – another ridiculous high school movie cliché, but one that he now kind of understood. On the bike ride over he'd practiced ways of doing it so that it would seem casual - *No big deal El, here, have mine.* But now that clearly wasn't going to happen.

"Mike, come back down to this planet – Mike!" It was Dustin, waving a hand in front of his eyes.

Mike squeezed his eyes shut and opened them again, hoping El hadn't noticed him staring. "What?"

"Did you see who's behind us?"

Mike turned around and his heart sank at the sight of the vehicle parked a few feet behind them. It was a black Camaro IROC, which unmistakably belonged to Troy – James's equally evil counterpart.

When they were kids, Troy had made recess a nightmare – always seeking out Mike and his friends to find some new way to humiliate them.

As the years went on he stopped hunting them down every chance he got, but still, it was always tense when they crossed paths. While James was fond of shoving or tripping, Troy used his words as a weapon – he came up with a brand-new string of insults every time he felt like giving one of them a good razzing. Mike knew he shouldn't care, but it always made him angry – why did Troy bother picking on people so obviously lower on the social ladder than him?

Troy was in the driver's seat and James was sitting shotgun. They were turned, talking to whoever was in the backseat.

"Do you think we should move before they spot us?" Mike asked.

They looked around, but the lawn was nearly full.

"Nah, screw Troy," Lucas said, "We've got a prime spot, I'm not moving because of that mouth breather."

El was still looking back at the car. "Who is it?"

Mike was about to answer her, but he stopped himself – he didn't want to have to explain why they were afraid of Troy.

"Just a couple of wasteoids," Dustin offered.

El frowned, and Mike knew she was wondering what the word meant. He leaned toward her. "They're mean guys... just some jerks."

She smiled, thanking him with her eyes.

The lights around the screen dimmed a little then, and there was a cheer from the crowd. Mike shifted closer to El.

"Excited?"

She nodded.

"You should be."

She hugged her knees to her chest, her eyes transfixed on the screen as the opening credits began. Mike tried to focus on the movie, but he kept glancing over at El to see if she was laughing or smiling or looking away in fear. He knew it was probably really annoying, but he didn't want to miss any of her reactions.

At one point he saw her frowning, so he leaned in to explain what was usually a confusing part for a *Star Wars* first-timer. She nodded at his words but never looked away from the screen.

If he couldn't focus before, it was nearly impossible to do so once he was close to her. As nervous as it made him, he kept looking for things to explain to so he wouldn't have to move away. It went on for a few minutes before she finally turned toward him. Her face was inches from his and Mike's breath caught in his throat.

"Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"I don't think you're supposed to talk during movies."

Oh.

He shifted back to his spot, feeling like a complete idiot. Not only had he kept looking at her like a total creep, but he distracted her from one of the best films of all time by explaining things she probably didn't even need help understanding.

For the rest of the movie, Mike exerted every effort to keep his eyes on the screen – except for the really exciting parts, when there was enough commotion for her not to notice him studying her reaction. Hopefully.

When it was over, the lights around the screen came back up a little and a guy from the drive-in shouted through a megaphone that there would be a fifteen-minute intermission. El got up right away, excusing herself to the washroom.

It was like a sitcom, the way his three friends turned around to look at Mike with expectant faces.

"So?" Dustin said, rubbing his hands together. "You guys weren't sucking face back there, were you? I guess we wouldn't have been able to hear it anyway, the speakers were so loud."

Mike dropped his head into his hands. "Jesus, Dustin – no."

"Arm on shoulder?"

Mike shook his head.

"Hand hold?"

When Mike didn't respond, Lucas sighed. "Man – come on. You're lucky you've got a whole other movie to go."

"Lucas," Will said in his ever-present-voice-of-reason tone, which Mike was grateful for.

He looked up at them. "I was trying to explain the more technical parts to her but she told me there wasn't supposed to be talking during movies."

Lucas burst into laughter, and Will quickly smacked him on the side, eliciting a dramatic "Ow!"

"At least she's enjoying it?" Will offered.

"Yeah," Mike said, feeling defeated.

He was about to say something else, but El was already walking back toward them. She resumed her spot beside Mike.

"What'd you think, El?" Dustin asked.

She was smiling wide, her eyes dancing with excitement. "Amazing. It's just... amazing."

She started recounting her favorite moments and they listened intently, nodding their heads along or orchestrating over-the-top reactions at the parts of her analysis they disagreed with.

Then the lights dimmed again and it was time for *Return of the Jedi*.

El sat with that same rapt attention on the screen.

What Mike had held back from saying to his friends was this: that maybe things were different with El. That maybe she didn't know the same clichés that Mike did about what was supposed to happen or not happen when you were at the movies with someone you liked. And maybe that wasn't a bad thing.

Ten minutes into the movie, Lucas stood up. Dustin and Will quickly followed, and Mike was about to do the same, thinking something was wrong. But Will leaned toward him.

"We're gonna go grab popcorn and stuff, but... stay here, we've got you covered."

Oh. Mike knew what they were up to, but he couldn't pretend to be angry enough to say anything to Will about it. They crouched and hurried away through the crowd, and then him and El were alone in the darkness.

She didn't seem to notice the boys leaving. She was sitting with her legs crossed, leaning back with her hands resting behind her. Mike couldn't resist the feeling of wanting to be close to her again.

He shifted toward her, hoping he was being discreet. She didn't look away from the screen. He glanced at her hand closest to him resting on the blanket, wondering if it would be weird to cover it with his own. He tried to steady his breathing and was deciding how to go about it when he heard a loud, gruff voice that undoubtedly belonged to Troy call out from behind him.

"Awh come on Wheeler, you gonna make her wait the whole second movie, too?"

Mike froze. He thought they'd escaped Troy's heckling for the night, but he'd obviously recognized Will, Dustin and Lucas when they stood up. El frowned and glanced over at Mike before turning back to the screen.

Troy called out again, louder this time. "That is, if it's actually a her. From behind I almost couldn't tell!" Mike could hear James laughing.

No. Not El.

"Is that him?" El whispered.

A deep-seated anger began to stir in Mike. "Just – just ignore him. He's an idiot."

"Better hurry up, Wheeler! Who knows how long it'll take to convince her to give it up!"

Mike balled his shaking hands into fists. His normal approach was to stay quiet – he never wanted to dignify anything Troy said with a response. But this was about El now, and he'd already gone too far.

"You need a reward or something, Wheeler?" Troy shouted again. "That would be easy enough – five bucks if you feel her up, ten if you can get her to go all the way." The other people in his car were howling with laughter now. *Not El*. That son of a bitch.

El was looking at him with worried eyes. He turned back towards the car. "Shut up, Troy," he said, unable to temper the rage in his voice.

"Oh, he speaks!" Troy said, and everyone in the car shouted in mock surprise. "I'm just looking out for you, Wheeler. God knows you need all the help in the world to get laid."

Mike could feel his heart pounding, and he dug his fingernails deeper into his palms. He racked his brain for the worst insult known to humankind, ready to hurl it at Troy.

"Stop."

It was El's voice, cold and low in a way Mike had never heard before. She was turned around fully, glaring at the car.

"Ah, so the other freak can speak too!" Troy yelled, leaning further out of the driver's side window. "Listen, sweetie – I know it's frustrating waiting for Wheeler to grow a pair."

Not El, not El, not El. Mike started to rise to his feet, but she grabbed his arm. "Mike... it's – it's okay."

His hands were shaking uncontrollably now. "No, it's not."

Someone nearby shushed them and things were silent for a moment. Mike tried to turn back to the movie, thinking Troy had finally run out of steam. But then came his voice again.

"Look Wheeler, all I'm saying is you gotta get her horizontal. I know you don't have a backseat but... you know, freaks like her probably don't care."

That's enough. Mike tried to get up again but El grabbed him with both hands now. Her eyes were fearful as she clung onto his arm desperately. "It's not worth it," she said in a whisper.

Mike was so enraged he felt like he couldn't breathe. But he didn't want to scare El, or do something stupid that would get him in way over his head. He sat back down, and El kept her hands on his arm. She was staring back at the car, a concentrated look in her eyes.

Mike was trying to read her expression when suddenly, a loud crackle of static cut into the darkness. The high-pitched whine sounded like a wire short circuiting, and it quickly drowned out the raucous laughter still coming from behind them. Mike was confused, glancing around for the source of the noise before he realized it was coming from the small speaker attachment fastened onto the driver's side of Troy's IROC.

The static became louder until there was a pop and hiss and the speaker blew out entirely, emitting one loud screech that made James cover his hands over his ears – Mike took note of that to tell his friends later. A few sparks flew from the wire attaching the speaker to the drive-in's audio source.

"What the hell!" Troy shouted, opening the car door. He got out, and though the lighting was dim Mike could see him fiddling with the speaker, tapping on it and shaking its cord.

"The stupid thing blew out!" Troy yelled over his shoulder.

A few people got out of the car, shouting and arguing over what happened. That caused a passenger a few cars down to shout, "Would

you shut up? Trying to watch a movie here!" Mike laughed and turned back to El.

"Serves them right, God I can't believe – hey, are you okay?"

There was a single trail of blood running under one of her nostrils. "Your nose..." he said, and at the mention of it she seemed to snap back into the moment. She raised her sleeve to wipe the blood away, but stopped short.

"Ah – this is my Dad's sweater."

Before he knew what he was doing, Mike pulled his sleeve down over his hand. "Here," he said, offering it to her.

She frowned and leaned back a little. "Doesn't that gross you out?"

He shook his head. "Nah, this thing is old anyway. I don't care, trust me – here." At least all that rehearsing about offering her his sweater hadn't gone to waste.

Holding his wrist gently, she quickly wiped her nose on his sleeve and then pulled away, covering her mouth with her hand.

"Want to go find some tissue?" Mike asked, and she nodded.

They both got up, maneuvering carefully through the dark crowd. Mike could still hear arguing coming from Troy's car, and James's voice rose above the rest – "This thing is a bust, man, let's go." A few moments later he could hear the IROC's engine rev up, the tires screeching on the pavement as it pulled away.

Mike wasn't sure if he was a believer in karma, but what just happened sure seemed to be clear evidence of it. And he was glad; a couple of punches to the head would've been more fitting, but seeing Troy fiddle like an idiot with the busted radio was still pretty satisfying.

They finally made it to a small concession stand, and El grabbed some napkins off of the condiments table and held them under her nose.

"You okay?" he asked.

She nodded. "It happens sometimes... no big deal."

Mike sighed. The anger had subsided a little, but he was still furious at the things Troy said about El.

"I hope that wastebasket didn't upset you... I-I'm so sorry, El." Why didn't I defend her? He should've given Troy what he deserved. If there was any time to do it, it was back there, when he'd insulted El – the one person Mike was intent on keeping safe.

She wiped her nose on the napkins one more time and tossed them in the trash. "Don't be sorry, it's not your fault."

"You're not a freak," Mike blurted. Of all the awful things Troy said, that one angered him the most. "You're not."

El just smiled. She looked up at him for a long moment, and Mike wondered what she was thinking.

"Ready to go back? I don't want to miss any more of the movie."

He nodded, and as he turned back toward the crowd she slipped her hand in his, lacing their fingers together. She did it as though it were routine, as though that was how they usually walked together. It seemed so natural and Mike didn't want to do anything weird to mess it up, so he just kept going, leading her through the crowd.

As they made their way past the long line of parked cars, Mike could hear a faint murmur coming from each speaker attachment. How are they all still working? From the way Troy's speaker seemed to blow out, Mike would've expected there to be a problem with at least a few others. But everything seemed to be working fine.

They found Dustin, Lucas and Will back in their spots. Mike knew they were all taking note of his and El's intertwined hands, and he purposely avoided meeting their eyes.

Once they were settled, El pulled his hand onto her lap, holding it with both of hers. Mike had been pondering the odd speaker situation, but with that all coherent thought left his mind. She leaned

in close to him and Mike's breath caught for the second time that night.

"Tell me about the parts I missed," she whispered.

Thanks for the support so far! Please continue to leave reviews and let me know if I should keep posting and what you think of the story so far! And reminder to come share your ST love with me on Tumblr at: writer-lea :)

7. Chapter 7

Mike was the last to arrive at the cafeteria table at lunch on Monday. Will, Dustin and Lucas were already seated, and so was El. They were engrossed in conversation, none of them sensing his approach in the slightest. He slid onto the bench next to El, and she smiled at him quickly before turning her attention back to Dustin.

"But I mean we all just biked past her, figuring her Mom was nearby," Dustin was saying. He threw a mischievous glance in Mike's direction. "So we kept going, but pretty soon we realized we'd lost Mike."

Oh good God. He was recounting the Saint Michael origin story. To El.

"Dustin – is this really necessary?" Mike said, hurrying to cut in before he got any further.

But El shushed him before Dustin could respond. "He's just getting to the good part," she said.

"Thank you, El," Dustin said, smirking. "So we look back," he continued, "And Mike's crouched down in front of her, making faces, doing hand-clapping games – the whole nine yards, to get her to stop crying."

Lucas chimed in then, laughing to himself. "We were pretty far ahead, but... I swear you could hear him singing *The Itsy-Bitsy Spider*."

Mike groaned, covering his face with his hands.

"Anyway, the girl totally bought it," Dustin said. "She only started crying again when her Mom showed up and told her it was time to leave."

"Will, is that true?" El asked, and Mike could hear her trying to stifle a giggle.

"I think Dustin added that last part for flourish, but..." Will said, glancing at Mike, "Yep, it's all true."

Mike felt El's hand tugging on his wrist. "Don't be embarrassed. It's a cute story."

A cute story?

"Yeah Saint Michael, don't be shy!" Lucas chimed in, reaching across the table to shake Mike's shoulder.

Exasperated, Mike dropped his hands and glared at Lucas. "Watch yourself, Pudding Sinclair," he said, doing his best to sound menacing. Lucas's grin instantly turned into a scowl, and Mike burst into laughter.

"Pudding who?" El asked, frowning at the two of them.

"Oh, El," Dustin said, clearing his throat. "Allow me."

He launched into the story of Lucas's much-detested nickname, which was coined after a pudding eating competition between Dustin and Lucas on a hot summer day after sixth grade. Lucas had been determined to beat Dustin at his own game. But he got way in over his head, and just as he was about to shout "Victory!", he threw up chocolate pudding all over the sidewalk outside of Bradley's Big Buy.

There weren't many people around to witness the debacle, but it was something the gang would never let Lucas forget. All these years later, calling him Pudding Sinclair was guaranteed to elicit an over-the-top reaction.

The rest of the lunch hour was spent recounting similarly ridiculous stories from their childhood, much to El's delight. She laughed harder than Mike had ever seen – head thrown back, hand over her heart – and it was contagious, just like when she smiled. At least for Mike it was. And when she reached for his hand under the table he took it, not missing a beat, lacing their fingers together.

The gang parted ways at the cafeteria doors. But instead of heading in the direction of her locker like usual, El turned to follow Mike. Surprised, he slowed down a little to let her catch up.

"Gonna play hooky or something?"

Her brow furrowed in the expression Mike had come to learn as the one that meant she wasn't familiar with a certain word or phrase.

"Not going to class," he said quickly so she wouldn't have to ask.

She shook her head. "I've missed too much class already. I was just..." she turned toward him. "Can we talk?"

Mike stopped walking and backed up against a nearby locker. The jittery feeling he'd had at the drive-in returned, so rapidly and with such intensity it was like it had never really gone away. "Sure, um..." he said. "Now?"

El was glancing back and forth at the students hurrying by. "No no, um – just, sometime soon?"

Alright, so it's not urgent, Mike thought, feeling a shred of relief. "Okay. Well, uh – sure, whenever you want, El."

She was still looking around, and when she spoke again her voice was lower. "What about Wednesday, at lunch?"

"Sure, sure okay, Wednesday should be –" Mike started, before quickly realizing it wouldn't work. "Wait, no – that's when I prep the AV room."

"I know," El said. The hallway was almost empty and she finally met his gaze. "We'll talk in there, okay?"

Any semblance of respite dissolved away, and the nervous stutter in Mike's chest picked up again. She hadn't framed it as a question. She wanted to talk to him alone.

He knew his voice would betray his calm façade, but he was worried now. "Is everything okay?" he asked.

It was the kind of question that most people took as rhetorical, a phrase so often waved away with a "Yeah, yeah", even when that clearly wasn't the case. But El's eyes were afraid, searching, and Mike could tell she wouldn't do that. She wouldn't lie to him.

"Right now, yes," she replied, her voice still low.

Mike wasn't sure what to make of that answer. They met eyes, but the bell rang after a moment, making them both wince.

"I have to go," El said, squeezing his hand. "Don't want to... play hooky."

Mike smiled and stayed where he was, watching her as she hurried off.

He might as well have skipped class for the rest of the day. *Can we talk?* Echoed in his mind in a haunting chant, a simple question that lead him down a nerve-racking spiral.

Mike knew those words were usually a bad thing; it was textbook breakup language, meant to forewarn the person who was about to get their heart broken. But he and El weren't even dating – and they weren't exactly close to it, either. Which, the more he thought about, the more he realized was kind of his fault.

El had been the one to take initiative so far - if it could even be called that. If she was even thinking of things in the same way that Mike was. That was a whole other problem he'd been contending with. Still, she'd invited him into the cabin, hugged him goodbye, brought the Fall Drive-In flyer to the AV room, reached for his hand during the movie, and at lunch earlier.

And then it hit him – what if *she* was the one who was unsure if he felt the same way? If Mike really thought about it, there wasn't much he'd done to show her that whatever it was between them was actually going to... go anywhere. He'd reciprocated her actions, of course, but was that enough? *God, I'm an idiot*, he thought, running over it in his mind until he was sure that was exactly what she wanted to talk to him about.

What if, feeling dejected about the glacial pace of clumsy Mike Wheeler, she was preemptively breaking up with him? *Good God, I am the world's biggest idiot.*

The only way to fix it was to tell her the truth, that he did feel the same way – *If she even feels any way in the first place* – and that he was

sorry he was so nervous and unsure of himself and let that get in the way of... something.

After hours of near-constant circling from *I'm such an idiot*, back to, *I have to make sure she knows*, Mike was hopelessly anxious as he walked into the cafeteria the next day.

But it was all for naught, because El never showed up. When his friends questioned him about it, he made up some lie about how she told him she had homework to catch up on. He never lied like that, even about small things. But he was overcome with the thought that El might be avoiding him, and he didn't want to have to explain himself.

He drifted through the rest of his classes for the day in a vague state of unease, looking for El every time he turned a corner or passed her locker.

When he got to the bike rack after the last bell, his friends were there waiting for him. He gave his usual wave, but none of them reciprocated. *Something's wrong*. As Mike got closer, he could see that they were each wearing the same worried expression.

His first instinct was to look at Will. "What's going on?"

Will looked between Dustin and Lucas, but they had both dropped their eyes to the ground. "I think... I think something happened to El," he mumbled.

"What?"

"Something happened –" Will repeated, but Mike cut him off

"I heard you – what happened?" his mind was racing, and he knew he sounded frantic but he didn't care.

Dustin spoke up, his eyes still on the ground. "I don't know exactly man, I heard people talking about it in English – I think she... I don't know if she meant to hurt anyone –"

"What are you talking about!?" Mike demanded. His hands had

started to shake.

Dustin sighed and looked up. "She was in the library, and some girls were laughing – about her clothes, or something, I don't know," he said. "They kept whispering 'freak' to get her attention..." Dustin trailed off when he saw the look on Mike's face. "They were sitting at a table near one of the bookcases, and I guess El... she – she pushed it over on them."

"She what?"

"They moved away in time," Dustin added quickly, "No one got hurt, but..."

Mike tried to steady his shaking hands. He thought Dustin was going to tell him that the teasing escalated and the girls had beat El up. He should've been shocked at what she'd done. But all he could see was that curious, disbelieving look on her face when he'd told her, *You're not a freak*. He walked past Dustin and began to unlock his bike.

"Where is she?"

Dustin shrugged. "She got sent home for the day, I think, but I would imagine –"

But Mike didn't hear the rest, because he was already on his bike, pedaling as fast as he could toward the cabin.

It took longer than usual to navigate through the dense forest without El's guidance, but Mike eventually reached the edge of the clearing that indicated he was there. He got off his bike and leaned against the handlebars, panting. His legs ached and his lungs burned.

When he lifted his head, he noticed the Chief's Blazer parked just in front of him. Although he'd prepared himself for that on the way over – the school had probably called him if El had been sent home – seeing it still put a pit in his stomach. It was likely the Chief was already in a bad mood, and having Mike there would only make it worse.

But he had to make sure El was alright – even though she wasn't the

one who had, according to Dustin, narrowly escaped being crushed by a bookcase. If anything, Mike should be afraid of her. But he wasn't.

She didn't do it on purpose, he'd kept thinking during the ride over, *there's no way*. And even if she had... they'd been making fun of her, calling her a freak. That was the final thing that drove Mike to grab his bike and head for the cabin. He had to tell her, again, that it wasn't true. That she shouldn't believe them. *Believe me instead, El*. That's what he was going to say to her. *You can trust me*.

Still trying to calm his breathing, Mike ascended the cabin's front steps and made his way across the porch. His hand was in midair, ready to knock, when he heard a loud bang echo from just inside the door. He froze.

"Hey, watch it! What are you doing!?" It was the Chief's gruff, booming voice. Mike could hear the sound of heavy boots crossing the wooden floor.

"You – you called me a liar." It was El, her voice raised, angry. "I didn't do it on purpose!" It sounded like she'd been crying.

"I don't care! I don't give a shit whether it was on purpose or not!" The Chief was yelling now. "Do you know what I've had to do to protect you? Do you know how dangerous it is if anyone sees –"

"Sees what? That I'm a freak!?" El screamed back.

Mike balled his hands into fists, his heart racing wildly. *No no no*.

"Kid – no, that's not what I was going to say, you don't understand –"

"Yes I do!" El screamed again. She choked out a sob, and Mike could hear the Chief's heavy footsteps again. "You – you want to hide me away! You're just like them!"

"Oh yeah? I'm just like them? How dare you –"

But his words were cut off by another loud crash, and Mike could hear El sobbing. "Stop!"

He's hurting her. Mike began to panic. He had to do something. He looked at the woods behind him and then back at the door. Thinking he'd have to break it down, he pressed his shoulder against it, bearing his weight. But when he turned the knob it flung open, smacking loudly against the wall.

The scene before him was chaos – half of the furniture was overturned, and the crate of records by the door was toppled over, album covers strewn everywhere.

But Mike's attention was on the middle of the room, where a small end table was suspended in midair. It was hovering almost above Mike's head, unmoored. Floating.

He glanced around frantically until he locked eyes with El. She was standing with her back to the kitchen, arm raised, hand outstretched. Tears were streaming down her face.

And her nose was bleeding.

"El?"

In an instant, the table fell to the floor. It landed with a thud just in front of the Chief, who was standing near the window.

The sound seemed to alert both of them to Mike's presence, and El gasped. "Mike?"

Mike stood, motionless, unable to come up with words. His mind was spinning with the image of the table hovering in midair, and he wondered if the exertion of the bike ride had deprived his brain of oxygen enough to make him see things.

The thump of the Chief's boots sent vibrations across the floor and in seconds he was in front of Mike, leaning down so he was inches from his face. "What the hell are you doing here?" he yelled, and Mike jumped back.

"I – I came to see if El was okay," he replied, trying to look at her over the Chief's shoulder. He had to get the words out. "El, I came to tell you not to believe them, that you're not –"

"Wheeler!" the Chief shouted. He shoved Mike against the wall beside the door, knocking the breath out of him.

"Dad!" El screamed, her voice frantic.

Mike tried to catch his breath, but the Chief was advancing toward him. He reached for the front of Mike's shirt and pulled him up. "You better get the hell out of here, now."

Mike struggled against his grip. "Please, just – let me – it's not her fault, whatever happened, she –"

But the Chief was backing him up again, heading for the door, and Mike was powerless against him. His heart thudded in his ears and he could hear El scream again.

Suddenly, Mike felt a force rocketing both of them back toward her. The Chief's hands dropped from his shirt, and Mike watched in shock as he flew backward, landing in a heap against the opposite wall. He slumped forward, and for a horrifying second Mike wondered if he was dead. But after a moment the Chief groaned, crouching forward onto his knees.

"Mike, please, you have to go," El said, choking out a sob.

Mike looked up. Blood was trailing down both of her nostrils now, and she looked pale. She leaned forward and placed her hands on her knees, gasping in ragged breaths.

Mike stayed where he was, paralyzed with fear but desperate to make sure she was okay.

"El – I – I'm sorry, I didn't –"

"Please Mike, just... it'll be okay. But right now you have to go." She was glancing between Mike and the Chief, who was beginning to rise to his feet.

Mike backed up slowly, his fear of what would happen if he stayed superseding the need to get to El. He took one last look around the room and then headed for the door.

He wasn't sure what carried him then, down the steps, onto his bike, out of the woods and onto the main road. He could feel his legs moving, feel the ache in his shoulders where the Chief had grabbed him, but somehow all of it was dulled.

There was nothing to speculate on, no clues to dissect, no list of potential explanations for *the lab* or *Firestarter* or Troy's speaker blowing out at the drive-in. Because it was El. There was something, just like he'd thought all this time... something powerful that he now knew was real. It was her.

8. Chapter 8

Thank you very much for the feedback and the follows thus far! This is one of my favourite chapters so I hope you enjoy it. Reviews are really motivating and I just love reading your comments so please leave one if you'd like :) also - I know I keep saying it but please, come say Hi if you're on Tumblr writer-lia. Getting to chat with other ST fans just makes my day, and this fandom is so kind and welcoming. So don't be shy!

For the first time since seventh grade, Mike considered faking sick so he could stay home from school. He knew it was childish, and there was no chance his Mom would buy it – she *never* let him miss school. But as he lay in bed listening to the bustle of his family going through their morning routine, he wanted nothing more than to stay put.

If he did, maybe he'd get the rest he desperately needed. He'd barely slept last night. Whenever he closed his eyes, his mind raced with images of El's pale, scared face. And when he tried to quiet his mind, all he could hear was the Chief's shouting, his low threat. *You better get the hell out of here, now.*

If he stayed put he wouldn't have to face his friends, who would definitely have questions – none of which he'd be able to answer. The moment he cleared the edge of the woods outside the cabin, he'd vowed to himself not to tell anyone about what he saw, not even Will. He already felt bad about not sharing the bookstore incident or *the lab* with his friends, and he knew keeping this from them would only make it worse.

But he also knew, with a conviction he didn't yet understand, that telling would be dangerous. He'd pieced together enough from yesterday to realize that El's powers were kept secret because it might be harmful otherwise

A few loud knocks on the door broke him from his reverie. "Mike!" came his Mom's voice. "Come on honey, you're going to be late!"

He sighed, sitting up and swinging his legs onto the floor. There would be even more suspicious questions from his friends if he didn't show up at school. And what if El was there? He highly doubted she would be, but he didn't want to pass up the chance to see her after everything that happened.

That was all he wanted yesterday when he sped off toward the cabin. To see if she was okay – and if she wasn't, to comfort her, reassure her that what those girls said wasn't true. Now he didn't know if he'd ever be able to make things okay, and that scared him; more than the Chief, more than keeping secrets. That scared him more than anything.

At the bike rack, Mike managed to dodge the Spanish Inquisition from Dustin and Lucas about what happened when he left school. He said that El wasn't even home and that the whole thing had been a waste, and they seemed to buy it.

When he headed for the AV room at lunchtime, he tried to focus on nothing but the jangling of his key ring, repeating *She won't be there she won't be there she's not gonna be there* in his head. As he rounded the last corner he saw Barry, whistling away as he mopped the floor. Mike mumbled his usual greeting.

"President Wheeler!" Barry said in a cheerful tone, "You just missed your little lady friend." The key was in the lock, ready to turn, but at Barry's words Mike paused.

"What?"

"Yeah! Quiet girl, curly brown hair? The one I see around here sometimes?"

Mike could only nod.

"She just came out of there," Barry said, gesturing toward the AV room door. "Five minutes ago, maybe. I thought she might be waiting for you so I tried to tell her you were on your way, but..." he shrugged. "She took off."

Mike glanced around quickly, half expecting to see El rushing past. He thought fleetingly of trying to go after her, but he knew it was useless – if she'd hurried away like Barry said, she obviously didn't want to talk to him.

"Thanks for letting me know, Barry," he said, feeling dejected.

"Anytime, President Wheeler."

He knew she wouldn't be there, but Mike still scanned the room as he stepped inside, unable to quell the small bit of remaining hope. He let out an uneasy breath and closed the door behind him.

As he flipped the lock shut he thought about that first day, when he'd wondered how she was able to get into the room. Now the answer presented itself in its unlikely form: she'd done it with her mind. *With her mind.*

Mike leaned against the door, still surveying the room. His eyes rested on the spot where he'd first seen her, and he noticed that a paper crane was sitting on the desk. He walked over to it and placed it in his palm, exactly like he had last time. It felt like so long ago. So much had changed irrevocably since then, in ways he still couldn't grasp.

The crane was made with El's signature blue paper, and there was a drawing of a bicycle on one side. It was Mike's bike; he knew because of how the handlebars were drawn and the way the scuffs on the seat were shaded in. Tucked into the wing on the other side was a small slip of paper. Again feeling jolted back into the weeks prior, Mike unfolded it to read the words.

Please give me time.

He didn't see El at school the next day or Friday. And he knew it wasn't because he kept missing her; Dustin reported that she hadn't been in English class either.

Part of him wanted to be angry at her, but he didn't know what for. She'd asked for time, so that's what he would give her. But that didn't

mean the questions or worries went away. How much time did she need? Would she come back to school at all, or would he have to see her somewhere else? Would she let him know when she was ready to talk? Would she even *want* to talk to him after what happened?

He tried his best to act like his normal self, not wanting to draw attention to the whole situation or invite a barrage of questions from Dustin or Lucas. But having to keep it all in made it worse. He was sure that seeing El, hearing her voice, holding her to him like that day outside the cabin, would be the only relief.

On Saturday, the four boys were sprawled out in Mike's basement, having reached the point in a marathon hang out in which everyone was doing something individually but still wanted to be together.

Will was lying across the floor, half-finished drawings scattered around him as he sketched absentmindedly on a notepad. Lucas and Dustin were flipping through comics, and Mike was stretched out on the couch re-reading *The Hobbit*. Well, he was trying to. Thoughts of El seemed to spill across the page, forcing him to restart paragraphs over and over until the words became meaningless.

As though reading his mind, Dustin looked up from his spot on the floor beside the couch and nudged Mike's foot. "You hear from El or anything?"

The mention of her name made Mike nervous for some reason. He kept his eyes on the book. "Nope," he replied, hoping it sounded nonchalant.

"Weird," Dustin said. "I mean she couldn't have gotten suspended from school for this long, could she? It wasn't *that* bad."

No one said anything, but Dustin was undeterred, continuing to think out loud. "Maybe those girls complained to the principal or something. Maybe they're really scared of her."

Mike felt a jolt of anger but he tried to temper it, conscious of not wanting to give anything away with a reaction.

"Maybe we should be too." It was Lucas, talking from behind his comic.

Calm down.

"What?" Dustin asked.

Lucas folded the comic's cover back so he could look at them. "I mean maybe we should be scared of her, too."

Calm down calm down calm down. "Why would that be?" Mike asked, unable to hold back.

"I don't know man, think about it. She pushed an *entire* bookcase over on a few girls, just for calling her some names. She could've killed someone – she's lucky no one got hurt. And then she doesn't show up to school for the rest of the week? It's weird. It's... not normal." Lucas placed the comic back so it was covering his face.

The words on the page in front of Mike became blurred, and he realized it was because his hands were shaking. He knew the right thing to do was agree or stay silent, but he couldn't.

"She didn't mean to hurt anyone," he said, still not looking up from the book.

Lucas let out a laugh. "Oh so she pushed the bookcase for what, a dramatic exit? Come on Mike – you have to admit that's kind of crazy."

"She's not crazy," Mike shot back before he could stop himself. "I just... I know El wouldn't do that on purpose."

"Oh yeah?" Lucas said, "How would you know, have you talked to her?"

"No, but – "

"Exactly, so you don't know. I'm sure if you asked those girls they would say it was definitely on purpose."

Mike scoffed. "Oh what, so you'd believe a bunch of stuck up girls in

our grade? Have you talked to *them*?"

"No Saint Michael, I haven't. But we haven't even known El for that long. And I'd believe them over her, man, I mean come on. They're... normal, and El's obviously not – "

On an angry whim, Mike hurled *The Hobbit* right at Lucas, who raised his elbows instinctively and blocked the book from hitting him in the face just in time.

"Jesus, Mike! What are you – "

"Don't say that about her," Mike said, his voice low and filled with rage.

Will and Dustin had scrambled up from their spots and were glancing frantically between the two of them. Lucas also sat up, tossing his comic onto the floor.

"Mike, come on, don't get all pissed off over it. You know what I mean, right? El, she's –"

"Stop," he nearly shouted, worried about what he might do if Lucas kept talking. He looked at him straight on. "She's our friend, okay? That's what she is. End of story."

Will was usually the one to shut down arguments with the last word, but this time it seemed to work for Mike. After a moment everyone resumed what they were doing, the room filled with a rare tension. The shaking in Mike's hands subsided, and as his anger faded it was replaced with a resounding guilt over how he'd acted. It wasn't like him in the slightest.

Less than half an hour later, Lucas announced he had to get home to help his Mom with something. It sounded like an excuse, but Mike didn't blame him for wanting to leave. His heart sank a little when Will and Dustin both said they were going to head out too – he wouldn't have a chance to redeem himself, at least not today.

Mike lead them out to the garage and watched as they all got on their bikes. Dustin and Lucas headed out together, but Will stayed behind, poised with one foot on the ground and one resting on a bike pedal.

When Dustin and Lucas were out of sight, he spoke. "Remember the summer after sixth grade?"

Mike frowned. "I mean... marginally, yeah." He couldn't think about what would've been happening at the time other than their usual summer antics.

"It was right after my Dad left," Will said.

Oh. Mike thought back to that time, when he and Lucas and Dustin didn't really understand what divorce was or why Will was so quiet all the time. He remembered them trying to do things to cheer him up, like pooling their coins together so he could play his favorite game at the arcade three times in a row.

Will went on. "I remember sometimes I'd ignore your calls on the Supercomm, or I wouldn't show up when I knew you were all hanging out. It wasn't because I wanted to avoid you guys, I just..." he looked down, shoving his hands in his pockets. "I didn't know how to deal with it. And sometimes it was okay, but sometimes being around everyone made it harder, you know?"

Mike nodded. If Will had said this weeks ago he wouldn't have understood, but now he did. Keeping something inside that you don't even really understand can make you feel alone in a strange way.

"She'll come around," Will said. "Maybe she's been through things that make it hard to... be around people, sometimes." He gestured at Mike. "Even people who care about her."

For the first time in days, Mike smiled. Will the Wise. He always knew what to say.

"Thanks, Will."

Will put both feet on his pedals. "Anytime."

It was starting to feel like a new routine, walking to the AV room on Wednesdays and anxiously wondering the whole time whether El would be in there or not. It was somewhere between Déjà vu and the twilight zone, Mike thought.

She hadn't been in school the two days prior. On Monday night he'd seriously considered trying to call her house, or even biking out to the cabin. But those thoughts were squashed quickly when he remembered her paper crane. He'd kept it on the desk in his room since last week. Please give me time. He would wait for her, even though it was harder than he thought it was going to be. Much harder.

Barry was emptying some garbage cans when Mike rounded the corner, and he was especially glad to see him. "Sir Barry – see my lady friend anywhere?" Mike cringed at himself. He couldn't believe he'd just used Dustin's term so freely. What was wrong with him?

Barry shook his head, looking apologetic. "No sign of her, my friend." Mike was disappointed but glad that he asked, so his expectations would be in check. When he opened the door and shut it, he didn't bother to take a quick scan of the room.

But then came a soft, "Hi Mike."

He looked up and there she was; sitting atop one of the desks with her hands underneath her, swinging her legs back and forth.

El.

He wasn't afraid, or even surprised. He was relieved. Just the sight of her made every anxious feeling vanish, any sense of unease disappear.

There was so much he wanted to blurt out: how he was so glad to see her, how he'd been so worried, how he'd wondered if she was okay. Instead, he walked up to the desk and stood in front of her. He paused for a moment before leaning down to wrap his arms around her.

She was motionless at first and Mike started to let go, worried that he'd crossed a line. But then she lifted her arms and wrapped them around his waist, holding him tight.

"Did you get my crane?" her voice was muffled, her cheek pressed against his chest.

"Yeah – thank you," Mike replied.

They let go of each other, but Mike stayed close.

"Mike..." El shook her head, squeezing her eyes shut. "I'm so sorry."

"What? El – no." He placed his hands on her shoulders, and after a moment she looked up at him cautiously.

"You have nothing to be sorry for. It wasn't... I shouldn't have come to your house like that, I shouldn't have – "

"No, it's okay – I just wish... I wish you didn't see me like that," she mumbled.

He was about to ask what she meant, but then it came back to him in flashes; the table in midair, the Chief slumped against the wall, and her pale face, the blood running down her nose.

He was searching for a response when she spoke again. "That's not – I didn't want you to find out like that."

He dropped his hands. "Is that... is that why you wanted to talk to me?" She nodded.

Oh. The whole time Mike had been stupid enough to think that she wanted to talk about them – and whatever that might mean. Really, she'd been planning to give him the answer to the questions nagging at the back of his mind since that first day in the cafeteria. Mike could hear Lucas's voice in his head – *God, you can be so dense sometimes.*

El took one of his hands. "Mike... before I tell you, you have to promise that you'll keep it a secret. It's not just... it's really serious, okay? It's dangerous."

Mike nodded, the fearful look in her eyes making him worry all over again.

"And if... if you don't want to – be my friend, or talk to me anymore," she continued, "I'll understand. I will. But you still can't tell anyone, ever."

He squeezed her hand. "That won't happen."

"I know – I trust that you can keep a secret."

"No, not that. I mean I won't tell anyone, of course, but... I won't want to stop being your friend."

El looked down. "You might."

"I won't – that can't happen, okay? I promise."

She didn't reply. After a pause, she tugged his hand and motioned for him to sit beside her. He did, and once he was settled, she spoke.

"You know that lab about an hour outside of Hawkins, the one run by the Department of Energy?"

Mike did. Most Hawkins residents knew about it, since a lot of people commuted there for work. His Dad had talked about it before – it was a hub in Indiana for technology and weapons development, and his Dad liked to say that it was where all the important Commie-fighting tools were kept. He wasn't sure if that was true, but he'd never given it much thought.

"I was – raised... no, I lived, or I mean I guess I – " El stammered. Mike shuffled closer to her.

"It's okay," he said, his voice almost a whisper.

She sighed heavily. "I was... an experiment. A test subject."

She went on to explain that her Mom, who didn't know she was pregnant at the time, had taken part in these controversial experiments years ago that were meant to test the "boundaries of the mind". Participants were given hallucinatory drugs and put through sensory deprivation exercises, to see if it would bring about the capacity for things like telepathy or telekinesis.

After a few rigorous rounds of testing, El's Mom fell into a psychosis and was eventually checked into a mental institution. After she gave birth, she was deemed an unfit mother and El was taken away.

"But it was the people from the lab who took me," she explained. "They'd been monitoring my Mom. They messed up her case files to say she was an unfit mother, and that she had no family members who could take care of me. I pieced it together as I got older and overheard them talking about it once and while. When I got strong enough, I'd sneak out of my room at night to go through their files."

Mike kept squeezing her hand, both to comfort her and to help keep his own from shaking. A strange fear churned inside him.

"I guess I was born with these... abilities. So they'd run tests on me, make me do things. And when they didn't like what I did – or refused to do – they'd lock me up." She shuddered and Mike wrapped an arm around her, hugging her close.

"I wanted to get out, but I didn't know how to do it without destroying something and having them know right away." She paused, and he could tell she was searching for the right words. "By the time I started to plan it out ... my Dad was already close to finding me."

She explained that as a street cop, the Chief had also worked on missing children's cases on the side. There was a guy on the force who could hack into computer databases to look for addresses or records that might give the Chief a lead on something.

He found a missing person's report that Terry Ives – El's Mom – had filed for her daughter. It caught his attention because no police bureau had ever looked into it, so he took on the case. The investigation kept leading him back to the lab.

"I knew something was wrong because they made me stay in my room for days at a time, and I kept hearing whispers about how someone was 'On to them'," El said. "And I couldn't wait anymore. I thought that even if they knew I escaped, it would be too dangerous for a little while to come looking for me. So one night I used every bit of strength I had... and I got out."

"How did the Chief find you?" Mike asked, sure that she could hear how shallow his breathing had become.

"It was... crazy luck, I guess, that's how he explains it. The night I escaped, he was staking out the lab," she said, letting out a small laugh.

"And the thing is, I recognized him from a file I'd found during one of the times I was looking for stuff about me. It sounds crazy, but I just knew – I knew he was the one who'd been looking for me. So when I saw him..." she trailed off, her voice catching. "I ran out of there and straight to him."

She pulled her sleeves down over her hands and swiped them under her eyes. Mike held her close, taking everything in. He hardly had the full details, but it was worse than he could've ever imagined. She'd been taken from her mother, locked up, and kept in a cold, sterile place where she was viewed as an experiment rather than a human being. He could feel tears brimming in his own eyes, and he took a deep breath.

"So that's why they called you..."

She nodded. "Eleven."

"Were there others like you?"

"I don't know – I asked them but they never told me."

"And what about now... are they looking for you?" It was the first question that had come to Mike's mind.

"I'm not really sure," she replied. "My Dad's always monitoring things. He thinks a lot of the operations have just kind of dissolved – he says a lot of people who were keeping me there have left. He was close to exposing everything so I think they're trying to cover their tracks. But it'll never be really safe," she said, sounding crestfallen.

Mike thought back to the previous summer. "So when you came to Hawkins..." he said, not sure how to frame the question.

She looked at him, her brown eyes wrought with sadness. "I hid. In the cabin."

"For how long?"

"Almost a year."

Mike exhaled sharply, and El moved to rest her head on his shoulder. They stayed like that for a while, El's words from that day at the cabin echoing in Mike's mind: *You want to hide me away.*

He knew the Chief was protecting her, that there was probably no other way to ensure she'd be safe at the time. But the thought of her being kept there when she thought she was escaping to freedom was devastating. In many ways it explained the fear in her eyes on that first day. She'd gone from one confined experience of the world to another, and even now it was probably still jarring for her to interact with so many new people, to take in everything she'd missed out on.

There were still so many questions on Mike's mind, so he picked the one most pressing. "So what I saw last week," he said, "Those are your... abilities? Telekinesis?"

Much to his dismay, El lifted her head from his shoulder. She carefully lowered herself from the desk and took a few steps before turning to face him. He watched her, unsure of what was about to happen.

She took a deep breath and lifted her arm, stretching her hand toward Mike's backpack, which was resting on the floor in front of him. She trained her eyes on it, concentrating, until it slowly began to rise, floating just like the table in the cabin. She kept lifting it – *With her freaking mind*, Mike thought – until it was hovering just in front of him.

She flicked her hand in a downward motion and the backpack fell onto his lap. He looked at it and then back up at her in awe. He'd seen what her powers were, of course, but for some reason watching her use them like that made it all the more real. And incredible.

"It started out like that, with just little things," El said. "But the more I used them, the stronger they got."

She stayed where she was and turned her attention to the desk next to the one Mike was sitting on. She raised her hand again and then the desk was skidding quickly across the room. It banged to a halt

against a cabinet on the opposite wall, and a couple of textbooks resting on top of it fell to the floor.

Mike just stared at her, eyes wide.

"And there's another thing, too, but I'm still figuring out how it works," she said. "Sometimes if I focus enough, I can go into this place." She closed her eyes as if she were imagining herself there. "It's a place in my head... like a void, where I can see people wherever they are. But it's dark all around, and they can't see me."

Mike could feel his palms start to sweat, his mind alive with a mix of nervousness and excitement. She could do more than move things with her mind – way more.

"How do you find people?"

El shrugged. "That's what I'm still figuring out. Sometimes it's a picture, a piece of clothing, maybe. Sometimes I need to focus on radio static, or something like that."

The mention of a radio reminded Mike of another question. "At the drive-in, when Troy's speaker blew out – " he began, but she nodded, answering him before he could finish.

"I promised my Dad I'd never do anything in public, but he was being such a... wasteoid," she said, smiling at the use of Mike's word.

"What about the bookcase?" Mike blurted. She lowered her eyes, and he instantly regretted it.

"Sometimes I can't control it," she said, her voice rising a little. "If I get really angry, or scared or upset I just... I was trying to ignore them, I was – and before I realized what was happening – "

"It's okay El – you don't have to explain," he said, hating that he'd upset her. He slid off the desk and walked up to where she was standing.

She gazed up at him and spoke in that timid voice. "The same thing happened when you were at the cabin," she said. "I was scared my Dad was going to hurt you." She winced as though the words were

painful.

"You were scared? Try having the Chief charge at you – I swear I saw my life flash before my eyes," Mike joked.

El laughed a little. "He... he wasn't thinking. He was just angry. But he knew that I was going to tell you today."

"He did?"

She nodded. "That's why I needed time, so I could talk to him. He didn't want me to, and I think he's still uneasy about it, but... he said the choice was mine." Mike noticed that she was blushing. "And he agreed that I should tell you, before..." her voice became a murmur and she looked away from him.

Before what? He thought frantically. Then she stepped closer to him, reaching for one of his hands. *Oh.* His earlier thoughts about whether she returned his feelings had seemed so trivial in light of everything that he'd barely considered them at all. But now she was in front of him, and his heart raced like it had at the drive-in, and he was sure he could finish the sentence for her – *Before anything happens between us.*

And something was going to happen, because there were no secrets now and she trusted him and he promised her he wouldn't feel any differently and he didn't.

He raised the hand that was holding hers and brought both to his heart. He was certain she could feel its erratic pace, but it was okay because in that instant something had changed. They both knew now what the other had been guessing at, and there was nothing to be embarrassed about.

Carefully, he raised his other hand and brought it to the side of her face, resting it just below her jaw. He had no real plan for what he was doing so he just followed his instinct, caressing her cheek with his thumb. She closed her eyes. There were just inches of space between them now, and Mike would be the one to close the gap. He leaned down and kissed her.

Mike had thought about what it would be like to kiss El more than he would ever admit, and each time it lead to a dizzying amount of what-ifs: *What if I'm not good at it? What if she can tell I have limited experience? What if I do something wrong?*

But kissing her then, it was as if those thoughts had never even existed. He could focus only on the feeling of her lips moving against his, and just like when she'd reached for his hand at the drive-in it felt so normal, so obvious and right. She must have felt the same because she didn't hesitate, kissing him back, sighing against his mouth in a way that made him shiver.

Hours could've passed and it still wouldn't have been long enough for Mike – but he didn't want to push her into too much too soon, so after a minute or so he moved away slightly. But just before his lips left hers she pulled him back in, her fingers curling into the front of his shirt. It made him smile into their kiss and he held her closer to him, his hand moving up into her soft brown curls.

After a while they parted, both breathless. El looked up at Mike with a shyness in her eyes that made him want to kiss her again. Now that he finally had, he knew he was never going to stop wanting to.

"So you're... not afraid?" she asked, her voice low.

"Why would I be?"

Her eyes left his. "Because... because I – I'm – "

No. He wouldn't let her say it. "Incredible," he interrupted. "You're – you're incredible, El."

She opened her mouth to say something but Mike spoke again. "Don't believe what those girls said, okay? Don't. What you can do, it's... amazing. It's more than amazing, I mean amazing isn't even the right word to describe it, it's... it's totally out of this world, I mean, I'm – my mind is blown. And you're just, you're so – "

El leaned forward, cutting off his rambling with her lips. She flung her arms around his neck and Mike stumbled a little, taken aback. It took him a beat but then he relaxed, gathering her up in his arms,

relieved to be kissing her again.

Enveloped in his embrace, she felt small. Mike thought about that first day when he'd noticed her too-big clothing and thought she seemed fragile. He knew now how wrong he was. She was powerful in ways he never could've imagined.

9. Chapter 9

"Wait, you *kissed*? Like, on the mouth?"

"No Dustin, they kissed noses. Come on! Are you serious?"

"What! I'm just asking for simple clarification!"

"What *clarification* does 'kiss' need?! It's self-explanatory!"

Lucas and Dustin's bickering knew no bounds. Not even when they were interrupting something important, like Mike telling them about his and El's kiss.

"Can you two quit it, for once? This is important," Will interjected.

Mike gave him a grateful look. He usually ignored their arguing, but Will was right – it was important, and he'd been looking forward to AV club all day, for the chance to finally tell his friends what happened. It was something involving El that he could actually share, and just getting the words out lessened the pressure of guilt he still felt over the other secrets he was keeping.

Lucas gave an exasperated sigh, as if he'd been waiting for someone to break it up. He looked over at Mike. "So who initiated?"

"I did."

His friends were visibly shocked, and Mike was confused for a moment before Lucas spoke again.

"You did!?" Lucas exclaimed, letting out a low whistle. "Wow, Saint Michael, pulling the moves – I never thought I'd see the day."

Mike stretched his foot out and shoved Lucas in the leg with a force that made him yelp.

"I was not *pulling moves*, come on." He could sense that Dustin and Will were suppressing laughter. "Why would that be so surprising, anyway?"

"Well if you look at the evidence," Dustin began. "She was the one who invited you to her house, asked if she could come to the drive-in, and initiated the handhold during *Return of the Jedi* – "

"How did you know – " Mike tried, but Dustin held a finger up.

"I didn't – it was an educated guess, and you just confirmed it."

Mike groaned.

"What he's saying is, we thought you were too nervous or whatever to make a move," Lucas said. "You get all, I don't know... jumpy, when El's around."

Mike covered his face with his hands in embarrassment. *Great, well, it's good to know that other people can tell how much of fumbling idiot I am.*

"Well he did it, didn't he?" Will said, gesturing at Dustin, "Contrary to available evidence." He leaned forward to wrench Mike's hands away. "The point is," he said, smirking. "How was it?"

They were all listening then, and Mike's excitement over telling them came back in a rush. He grinned. "It was..." *Perfect. Mind blowing. Better than I could've ever imagined.* No words were satisfying enough to describe what it was like to be close to El, to hold her against him, to feel the gentle way her lips brushed against his.

"Oh my God, he's a goner. Just look at him!" Dustin chided, breaking into raucous laughter. Lucas and Will joined and then Mike couldn't help but laugh too; it was easier than trying to defend himself, which he knew would be hopeless.

They went on like that until they could hardly breathe, Dustin periodically gasping: "He's a goner! He's done for!", which would elicit more bouts of sputtering laughter.

When they finally calmed down, Will, who was wiping tears from the corner of his eyes, turned to Mike. "So what does this mean?"

"What does what mean?"

Lucas let out another sigh, this one even more exaggerated than the last. "Oh you know, Pythagorean theorem," he deadpanned. "The kiss Mike, the kiss! What does it mean, for you and El?"

He couldn't pretend he hadn't considered the question, but Mike wasn't sure how to respond. He hoped it meant he would get to be with El – in whatever way that meant. But he didn't want to overthink it, worried about freaking her out by asking things of her that she might not have a full grasp on to begin with.

He felt stupid for fretting over it so much. The girl could blow out a wall with her mind, and he was worried about what she thought their kiss meant?

"I haven't really thought about it," he said, going with the nearest half-truth. "But I mean, I hope it's – I don't know. I don't want to rush anything and freak her out or something."

"Good point," Dustin said. "If she saw the face you just made, she'd go running for the hills." That made them all laugh again.

Lucas reached over to shove him the way Mike had before. "I don't think she's going anywhere anytime soon," he said. "But don't wait too long, Saint Michael."

Mike didn't reply. They returned to their AV club duties, the moment having passed. His friends had given their blessing, again, and were even encouraging him to solidify whatever it was he had with El. So why was the guilty feeling rearing up again?

A small part of him wondered if they'd be as enthusiastic if they knew about El's secret, about how Mike had been lying to them. It didn't feel right to be grateful for their support even though he was. The thought of them changing their minds about El made him uneasy – because he couldn't fathom ever changing his.

"So what about the nosebleeds?"

It was roughly the hundredth question Mike had asked El since they'd bid their friends goodbye – she'd been waiting for him outside the AV

room – and began the bike ride toward the cabin. He'd tried to hold back at first, continually hearing his Mom's voice in his head: *Michael, it's rude to badger people.* But anytime there was a pause, another question seemed to find its way out of his mouth before he could stop it.

"Oh yeah," El said from behind him, "They don't always happen – only when it's really... difficult, or something."

She tightened her arms around his waist. There was something different about this bike ride, about the way she was holding on; her arms were wrapped all the way around him and she rested her cheek against his back, between his shoulder blades.

Whatever attempts she'd made before to keep some space between them was gone now, and Mike was glad. At one point she leaned up a little and placed a soft kiss just below his ear, and he knew there was no way to hide the blush that crept up the back of his neck.

Mike was racking his brain for something else to ask when El spoke. "Can I ask you a question now?"

"Of course," Mike said, laughing. "Geez, I think you're allowed at least one."

She didn't say anything. He felt her sigh against his back.

"Did you kiss anyone?" she said quickly, her voice muffled. "I mean, before... before..." she stammered.

Mike's blush deepened – both at the mention of their kiss and at the unexpected question. He wished the answer was no, because it felt like it should be. A grade school truth-or-dare peck on the lips and an awkward spin-the-bottle experience at a party last spring were all but erased the moment he kissed El. But he wouldn't lie to her.

"Yeah," he told her, disappointment coloring his words. "But it was nothing – I mean, they weren't people I liked or anything, you know, it was just... silly, or whatever. It wasn't – it wasn't like yesterday."

El was quiet for a moment. "It was my first kiss," she mumbled, and Mike had to strain to hear her. She sounded embarrassed, and he

wished he didn't have to hold onto his handlebars so he could reach for her.

"It's okay," Mike told her. "I'm – I'm sorry if – " he began, not quite sure what he was apologizing for.

"Sorry?" El interrupted. "No, there's nothing to be sorry for. It's normal to kiss more than one person, I – I think, by now. I'm the one who's – who's not..." her voice dropped to nearly a whisper as she searched for words.

Mike knew where her mind was headed. He knew what he wanted to say, but he had to be able to see her face, so she would know he was telling the truth. They were nearing the cabin now, fewer cars passing as they got further out of Hawkins. He slowed his pedaling and guided the bike onto the shoulder of the road. When they were stopped, he twisted around to face her.

"El, listen," he said gently. "There's no such thing as normal, okay? I promise you there isn't." She smiled a little.

"And even if there was, who cares? I – " Mike bit his lip. "I like you anyway." And then, just to make sure she knew, he leaned forward and pressed his lips to hers. He felt her smile against him and then he moved a little, placing a kiss at the corner of her mouth and then on her cheek. Her skin was warm.

"I like you too," she murmured, reaching for his hand.

Mike couldn't help the huge grin that spread across his face. He knew that she liked him, of course. That at least was obvious by now, even with his tendency towards doubt and self-consciousness. But hearing her say it – in that sure, steady tone – made his heart race in a way he'd never experienced.

Her lips brushed across his cheek then, mimicking his earlier movements. They crept closer to his mouth and he twisted further around, pulling her in closer so he could –

"GET A ROOM, SICKOS!"

Startled, they both turned to see a car speeding past, the horn

blaring. Someone had been leaning out the window, but they retreated back into the car when they saw Mike and El looking.

Mike squeezed her hand, laughing. "Guess they're not a fan of PDA."

"PDA?"

"Yeah uh –" Mike began, turning around and pedaling back onto the side of the road. "Public displays of affection."

"Hmm," El hummed against his back, contemplating the term. "I don't think I care."

She said it with an earnestness that made Mike laugh. "Me neither."

Between the kiss and his friends and *I like you too*, Mike had almost forgotten about the Chief. Almost. Underneath all of the excitement about El was the hard reality that he'd have to face the man eventually – but that didn't negate the fear that crept up the back of his spine when he pedaled into the clearing and saw the Blazer parked in its usual spot.

Mike slowed down and as they approached he saw that the Chief was sitting on the cabin's front steps. He was still in uniform but his hat was off, looking down as he passed it back and forth between his hands. *He's been waiting for us.*

Mike stopped beside the Blazer and glanced around awkwardly, unsure of what his next move should be. But El was already ambling off the bike seat and she tugged on his arm, deciding for him. He stayed behind her a little as they walked forward, which would've been a cowardly thing to do if Mike didn't know that now it was actually in his best interest. The Chief might look scary, but he wouldn't stand a chance against El's powers. At that thought a smile tugged at the corner of Mike's mouth, and he exerted every effort not to let it show.

Unafraid, El sauntered over to the porch and sat down beside the Chief, calling "Hey, Dad." In a gesture that looked familiar to both of them, the Chief reached out and pulled her into a tight hug, ruffling

her hair with a force that made El squirm in protest. "Hey kid," he replied, kissing the top of her head before letting go.

Mike just stood there, feeling all the more awkward. The Chief hadn't acknowledged his presence, which he guessed was better than the alternative. El started to say something, but her Dad nudged her with his elbow.

"Go ahead in," he told her. His eyes flicked up toward Mike. "Let Mike and I talk for a minute."

The swirl of fear tightened in Mike's chest. *Oh God. Well, this is the end, yep this is definitely the end.*

El looked between them, her eyes asking Mike for some kind of reassurance. He couldn't offer any but he gave a slight nod, hoping that was enough. In one quick movement she stood and jogged up the steps, the door slamming shut behind her.

The Chief tilted his head to the side, gesturing to the spot beside him. "Sit."

It was a command and Mike knew better than to ignore it. He walked over and took El's spot, making sure to keep a safe distance between them. The Chief had resumed shifting his hat between his hands.

"So she told you."

As Mike was beginning to learn, it wasn't a question. It was a declaration that to Mike implied something along the lines of: *I'm up to speed, Wheeler. Now listen up.* So contrary to his instinct, Mike waited for the Chief to speak again.

"You know I didn't want her to."

Yeah, I know, Mike thought, but he only nodded.

"The more people that know, the more danger she's in," the Chief continued. He turned toward him, and though he was still terrified, Mike met his gaze. "Do you understand that?"

"I – I do," Mike managed to croak. If the Chief couldn't sense his fear

before, he definitely could now. *Great, excellent, good job Wheeler.*

The Chief shook his head. "The lengths I've gone to... the things I've done to keep her safe, that could all go to shit the minute you open your mouth and the wrong person hears, and then – "

"I won't – I would never say anything," Mike quickly interjected. He tried to temper his voice. "I want to keep her safe."

He couldn't tell if the Chief was buying it or not. He wasn't sure what else to say to convince him, because it was the plain truth: he would protect El, no matter what it took. He'd felt that before he knew why, before he even had a reason.

The Chief was still, holding his hat with both hands now. "What about when you're done with all this, huh?"

Mike's brow furrowed. "What?"

"Look Wheeler, I know you two... get along," the Chief said, and Mike fought the urge to bury his face in his hands. "But you've only known her for what, a month? I know how these things go. She's new at school, it's exciting. But what about when that wears off, huh? And you drop her, and she's told you all of this, all about the worst things that have ever happened to her, and – " The Chief squeezed the edges of his hat together, and from his vantage point Mike could tell his hands were shaking.

He bit back the words that were at risk of tumbling out: *How dare you* or *How could you think that*. Instead, he leaned forward and folded his arms across his knees, piecing together what the Chief meant. He was afraid of El getting hurt – like any Dad would be – but it was more than that.

It wasn't just worry over Mike hurting her, but about whether she had gone to the painful lengths of telling him her deepest, most dangerous secret, only to have it be shut out, turned against her in one way or another. It made sense, Mike thought, even if it was wrong. What the Chief didn't know was that her secret had only drawn him closer.

And if he was being honest, in the back of his mind he was still grappling with the devastating possibility that El would be the one to turn away, to lose interest once she realized there was a lot more than just Mike out there. He felt so much for her, and it scared him, and he was bracing for the chance that he could lose her before anything even started.

Realizing that it had been quiet for too long, Mike spoke up. "I – listen, Chief, I – I mean, Sir," he attempted. *Pull it together, come on.* "I'm... I'm here. For El. I care about her."

"You can't pr – "

"I know I can't promise anything," Mike interrupted. "But I'm here." It was the best he could come up with.

The Chief sighed, and after a long moment he put his hat on. "Believe it or not, it's not me you should be afraid of," he said, "It's them." His features darkened at the mention of the people from the lab.

"I know."

The Chief stood, gesturing for Mike to follow. They ascended the steps up to the front door, and before the Chief pulled it open, he turned to Mike. "And listen Wheeler, let's get one thing straight."

Oh no.

"Drop Chief, okay? And Sir, too. Makes me feel old. Just stick to Hopper, or Hop, like most people around here do."

A palpable relief swept through Mike's body.

"Got it?"

"Got it."

Before when Mike knew he was going to see El, the main thing he felt was nervous. Questions like: *Will she want to talk to me?* would ricochet through his mind, making him dress-rehearse their interaction to the point of absurdity.

But now, all he could feel whenever she came into view was something like relief, but much stronger. *There she is*, he'd think, letting go of the breath he'd been holding, *There's El*. It was always followed by a pull, an immediate need to be close to her; as though there'd been a shift in the Earth that couldn't be righted until he was next to her. He'd have to ask her if magnetism was also part of her powers.

When the Friday bell rang Mike made a beeline for her locker, excited to ask her something he'd thought of on a whim during sixth period. She was loading up her backpack when he approached, her face furrowed in concentration.

She reached for one of the textbooks by her feet but he grabbed it before she could, causing her to look up. The smile that lit up her face made Mike's throat dry. *God, that smile*. "Hi," she said, beaming up at him.

"Wanna come to my house?" Mike blurted, suddenly unable to exert the self-control he'd rehearsed on the walk over to her locker. He bit his lip and squeezed his eyes shut, mentally kicking himself. *Eager much? Smooth, Wheeler*.

"Your house?" El said, hugging her backpack in front of her.

There was no going back now, so Mike went with it. "Yeah – I was thinking during last period, I've been to your house a few times but you haven't been to mine. We can bike there now. I mean, if you want to – you don't – you don't have to, of course."

"Will your Mom be okay with it?"

It felt so unlike El to ask that kind of question. He wondered if the Chief had given her a lecture about manners or something; not that she didn't have them, but she seemed unaware of certain social conventions – something that was comforting for Mike, who had trouble navigating them in the first place.

"Of course. She loves when I bring company over. Actually, she'll probably be ecstatic that I'm bringing a girl home." *Oh, my God*. "I mean – not like that," Mike said, scrambling. "Not like, I'm *bringing*

you home to – I meant, just, you know, I don't think I've ever – "

"Mike," El said gently, stopping his rambling from going off the deep end. "I'd love to. I'll just ask my Dad on our way out, okay?" He followed her as she started toward the doors.

"Sure," he replied, trying not to think about the Chief's – or Hopper's – scowl at the mention of bringing El to his house.

But Mike was surprised to find that she only leaned into the driver's side window of the Blazer for a few moments before coming over to meet him at the bike rack.

"We good to go?"

She nodded.

"He wasn't... mad?"

El shook her head. "He just said, 'Have a nice time, kid,'" she said in a poor imitation of Hopper's deep, gruff voice.

As soon as they headed away from school, Mike's nerves began to dissolve. El was telling him about her day, and he pedaled slowly so he'd be able to hear her properly. He was excited about every silly detail, excited for her to see his house, excited just to be with her. El. The telekinetic supergirl who made his heart race and his throat go dry with just her smile. *God, Dustin was right.* He was a goner.

When they pulled up to his driveway, she got quiet. Mike wondered if she'd ever been inside someone else's house. They put his bike in the garage and headed for the front door, and she trailed just behind him.

He reached for her hand. "Don't be nervous."

Her soft brown eyes were wide, curious. "I'll try."

They stepped inside and Mike instinctively glanced toward the living room, where he knew his Mom would be. Sure enough, she was stretched across the couch talking on the phone. Holly was at her feet, toys spread across the carpet.

Disturbing his Mom while she was on the phone was a *major* no-no in the Wheeler house, but Mike knew she'd want to greet El. They shuffled into the foyer and Mike closed the door loud enough so she would hear.

"I *told* her that," he could hear her saying. He craned his neck into the living room doorway, waving to catch her attention. "But she doesn't listen to me. I swear, if – oh, hold on one second, Michael just got home."

She cradled the phone against her chest. "Hi, honey. I'll be right off, I'm just – "

"I brought a friend over," Mike said quickly. He gave El's arm a gentle tug and she stepped beside him.

The look of surprise on his Mom's face was so obvious that Mike cringed. She brought the phone back up and gave a hurried "I'll call you back" to whoever was on the line and stood up, walking over to El.

"Hi, I'm Karen," she said, extending her hand.

El took it, smiling a little. "Karen," she said, as though she were testing how the name sounded. "Nice to meet you. I'm Jane." Even though Mike knew that was what she was supposed to say, it sounded strange. He hadn't known her as Jane for very long. To him, she was only El. *Telekinetic supergirl*.

"Well it's nice to meet you too, Jane," his Mom said. She glanced between the two of them with such tangible excitement that it made Mike blush.

"Can I get you something to drink, Jane? How about a snack?"

Here we go. Mike fought the urge to roll his eyes. His Mom always did this even though he kept telling her it was childish and embarrassing. It was the subject of endless teasing from his friends.

"Mom, please, we're fine. We were just going to – "

"Oh stop it, Michael, don't be rude. I'll go make something up for you

two." She put obvious emphasis on you two.

He turned toward her as she headed for the kitchen, intent on stopping her, but she waved him away.

He sighed. "Sorry, my Mom's always doing stuff like – " he began before realizing that El was no longer beside him. He looked around, wondering for a moment if she'd decided this wasn't for her and bolted out the front door.

But then he spotted her, sitting on the living room carpet next to Holly. They were both immersed in something on the floor in front of them and Mike leaned against the doorframe, craning his neck to get a better look.

"Here, what about this one?" El said, and Mike saw that she was holding up a puzzle piece. Holly made an excited noise as she took it from El's hand and placed it in the spot that fit.

Mike was surprised. Holly was a shy little girl and didn't do well around strangers; it was often a challenge just to get her to say Hello to someone. But she seemed to be relaxed, murmuring away as they handed each other puzzle pieces and tried to fit them into place. He'd never seen her so at ease with someone new.

Then again, it was El. She was as equally gentle and calming as she was powerful. The relief that washed over Mike whenever he was around her spoke to that. He felt safe with her, and not just because of her powers, but because she was honest and kind and true, and he was certain that everything would somehow be okay if he was next to her.

His Mom reappeared then, holding a tray of cheese and grapes. She stopped to see what Mike was looking at, and let out a little gasp when she saw what was going on.

"Holly's so calm," she said, looking at Mike in disbelief.

"I know."

"She must be special."

Actually Mom, she's a telekinetic supergirl, just so you know, Mike thought. But he just smiled.

"She is."

10. Chapter 10

No one ever noticed Mike when he walked through the cafeteria – except Troy or James, and that was never for a good reason. He was used to floating comfortably toward his friends, invisible to the throngs of high schoolers who either didn't know who he was or didn't care to. He liked it that way.

So on Monday when him and El walked hand-in-hand toward their table, the dozens of eyes he could feel boring into them was overwhelming. A noticeable hush fell over each group they passed, and Mike swore he heard someone whisper "*Wheeler?*" with an air of incredulity more than once.

But he didn't care. He was the one who had reached for El's hand at the doorway, pulling it in close as he lead them forward. It was part of keeping the promise he'd made to himself on the bike ride home after their kiss – to make it so that El never had a reason to doubt his feelings. She'd already waited long enough to find out about them.

Most of all, he wanted her to know that even if it drew undesired attention, he wasn't afraid of what people thought. At all. He would keep her secrets, but he would never hide her away.

Ironically, the only people who didn't throw them strange looks were their friends. Lucas, Will and Dustin had quickly come to expect the handholding, and had almost stopped teasing Mike about it. Almost.

As soon as they settled into their spots, Dustin slid a piece of paper across the table toward Mike. "Important information," he said proudly, eliciting exasperated groans from both Lucas and Will.

El leaned in to Mike's side, glancing over to read aloud. "Halloween extra..." she paused, frowning.

"Extravaganza," he finished for her.

She smiled up at him. "Is it an invitation?"

Dustin nodded. "Jennifer Hayes gave it to me after second period."

"She didn't give it to you," Lucas cut in. "You found it. On the ground."

"Okay, first of all I didn't *find* it," Dustin replied, "She dropped it when she was walking in front of me, and I very kindly picked it up for her!"

"So? It still doesn't mean she invited you."

"Yes she did! I picked it up and gave it back to her and she said, 'Oh, Dustin, you should come!'" he raised his voice into a high-pitched imitation of Jennifer Hayes, "'Bring your friends – those three you're always with, Will, Lucas, and Mark'." He threw an apologetic glance at Mike. "I know she meant you, Mike – she just thinks your name is Mark."

"All good," Mike offered, only half paying attention. El had moved their intertwined hands up onto her thigh and he was having trouble listening. *Don't be a weirdo don't be a weirdo focus focus focus.*

"Dustin, I just explained this to you. That doesn't qualify as an invite! You saw the flyer by accident and she felt bad, so she told you to come. It was out of pity."

"Lucas," Will said in a warning tone.

"What? You know I'm right – come on Will, it's Jennifer Hayes. Do you really think she'd ever willingly invite us to one of her parties?"

Jennifer Hayes had been the prettiest girl in their grade since Kindergarten, and she'd inevitably also become the most popular one when they got to high school. They'd all had crushes on her over the years, always with the knowledge that nothing would ever come of it. She ran in a very different circle, one that most definitely didn't include D&D, *Star Wars*, or the arcade.

"But I think most people in our grade are going," Will said, "And I saw Jennifer's sister handing out flyers, so the seniors will probably all be there, too."

Dustin raised both arms, gesturing at Will. "See?"

"That *still* doesn't mean she wanted to invite us!" Lucas shouted.

El glanced up at Mike, an expectant look in her eyes. Now would usually be the point where he would interrupt and beg them to stop the bickering, but all he could focus on was her, pressed up against his side, her thumb tracing circles on the top of his hand. Okay now's the time to focus don't be a weirdo come on come on.

He cleared his throat. "When is it?"

"Saturday," Dustin said, grabbing the flyer back from El.

Mike looked around the table. "I think we should go. If most of our grade is going... I mean, why not, right?"

Will nodded in agreement, and Dustin's face broke into his signature cheeky grin. "See? That's what I've been saying. Thank you, Mike."

"But there's – " Lucas said, leaning forward again, but Dustin held up a finger before he could continue.

"Ah, not so fast. The Paladin has spoken."

Lucas paused and after a moment he crossed his arms, scowling. Nothing like Party rules to stop him short.

"On one condition," Mike continued. "No dressing up."

"But it's a Halloween party," El said. "Don't... isn't that when people dress up?"

When none of the boys responded she looked around at them, confused. Then Dustin finally spoke, his voice somber. "She doesn't know about the Great Conspiracy of Halloween '84."

"The great what?"

But her question was again met with silence. Dustin sighed and cracked his knuckles; two key signals that he was about to launch into storytelling mode.

He began to recount in detail Halloween of eighth grade, when the

Party showed up to school in matching, hand-stitched *Ghostbusters* costumes, only to find that the rest of their classmates hadn't dressed up at all. The teasing went on for weeks, and it was enough to make them vow never to dress up for Halloween again, unless it was in Party company only.

"But we can still go – I doubt anyone will be dressed up anyway," Will said.

The rest of them mumbled in agreement. Mike gave El's hand a squeeze. "What do you think?"

She shrugged. "I've never been to a party before."

Dustin laughed. "Well you're in good company, El," he said, folding up the flyer and tucking it into the pocket of his sweater. "Neither have we."

It wasn't enough. Mike saw El every day for the rest of the week – he was always with her at lunch, and most days he found her after the last bell, waiting with her until the Chief picked her up or, if he was lucky, biking her home. On Thursday she came to his house and stayed for dinner, and even though his Mom had a strict rule of no friends over past 9 p.m. on a school night, he'd begged her to let El stay so they could finish watching *E.T.*

But it still wasn't enough. Not even close. And he was making it very obvious. They were waiting by the garage for the Chief to show up and he was hugging El close, peppering her face with kisses – cheeks, forehead, nose – so relentlessly that it made her laugh.

"Mike," she said, pulling back a little, "My Dad will be here soon."

"I know," he said, his lips brushing against her temple. "Exactly why I have to get all the kisses in now. Limited time equals maximum velocity."

She laughed again and reached her hand up to brush some of the unruly hair from his forehead. "Is this normal?" she asked, a little breathless.

"Is what normal?"

"I don't know, being so... wanting to..." she blushed a little. "Be together? All the time?"

Her hand moved away from his forehead and trailed along the side of his face, under his ear, finally resting at the back of his head. Her fingers grazed gently against his scalp and Mike closed his eyes, relishing in the feeling.

"I have no idea," he told her.

It's not like it was rocket science; when you liked someone, you wanted to be around them. But Mike never thought it would feel like this – like he *had* to see El, if not constantly, then as much as possible.

Before her, everything in his life had a place, a series of expectations simply fulfilled each day: school, home, friends, the arcade, Benny's, and back again, the order of which being the only thing that changed.

But it was like El had turned the volume up, doused everything in brightness. The need to see her and listen to her voice and hear her laugh was at a constant hum within him. When she wasn't there he could quiet it, but it never went away.

How could he know if it was normal if he'd never heard it described like that before? It was something else, something preternatural, present since that now fateful lunch hour cleanup of the AV room.

El hadn't replied, and a worrying thought occurred to him then. He opened his eyes. "Why? Is it – is this too much?"

"No, no it's not that," she said, shaking her head. "It's the opposite. It's like – like it's never..."

"Enough?"

She smiled in that shy way and lowered her head. "You feel the same way?"

"Definitely."

Mike dipped his head down to meet hers. "But remember what I said about normal?"

El nodded, laughing a little. "It doesn't exist."

He moved closer, so his next words came out in a mumble against her lips. "Exactly."

Then they were kissing, *again*, and her hands were weaving into his hair and his arms encircled her waist, pulling her closer so that she was on her tiptoes, and Mike was sure time and space had been suspended and there was nothing else, just the two of them.

He liked it that way.

"You've got to be *kidding* me."

Mike could barely hear Dustin over the loud thud of music blaring from a set of nearby speakers. They'd just arrived at Jennifer Hayes's house – "Fashionably late", as Dustin had demanded – and the party was in full force, the floors vibrating with frequent hurried footsteps.

It took Mike a moment to register what was going on. He craned his neck toward the packed living room, watching as people darted in and out. People dressed up. In costume.

Lucas sighed. "This has got to be a joke."

It wasn't just a few people, either – nearly everyone that passed was in some kind of costume. Most had opted for the classics – witch, ghost, vampire – but Mike saw a few well-done David Bowies and a gang of senior guys all wearing the creepy Michael Myers mask from *Halloween*.

It was just their luck; showing up to their first-ever party and standing out right away, for all the wrong reasons. They hadn't even stepped fully inside but Mike could tell the house was packed. A humid air wafted from the direction of the living room, where everyone was dancing.

Mike felt a squeeze on his hand and he glanced down beside him at El, who looked just as nervous as she had in the car ride over. She'd reached for his hand in the backseat and hadn't let go of it since.

"We should've listened to you," he told her, trying to lighten the mood a little, but she didn't respond.

They stalled in the doorway, no one making a move to enter. Mike was sure they were all thinking the same thing he was – *bail, bail, bail, abort mission*. But before they could decide, Jennifer Hayes appeared, jogging down the winding staircase just in front of them. She was dressed in an elaborate angel costume, and Mike instinctively looked at Dustin, whose jaw had all but fallen to the ground. *Smooth, Dustin*.

Just as she was about to head toward the living room, Jennifer noticed them standing there. Her eyes widened in obvious surprise, and their collective embarrassment was palpable. "Hi!" she said, stopping a few feet in front of Dustin. "Wow, you made it!"

Seeing that Dustin was considerably far away from pulling it together, Mike spoke up. "Yep, wouldn't want to miss it!" *Oh good God – Smooth, Wheeler*. "Thanks for inviting us, Jennifer."

She smiled, and Mike noticed that she gave El a once-over. He worried for a moment if she knew about the bookcase incident.

"Where are your costumes?" she asked.

They frantically looked at one another then, each of them silently pleading for the other to come up with a good answer. To Mike's surprise, Dustin was the one to brave the task.

"Costumes?" he replied, feigning ignorance. He scoffed a little, looking around. "I mean, costumes are... they're... kind of lame."

What?

It was a tone Mike had never heard Dustin use before – nonchalant, a distinct air of 'I'm too cool for this'. What was going on?

Jennifer looked visibly hurt, and after possibly the most awkward

pause in history, Dustin scrambled to recover.

"I – I mean, yours isn't lame! At all! I just mean that, you know, people getting dressed up, we thought that was like an, elementary school thing, I mean when you consider – "

But another girl from their grade, one of Jennifer's best friends, had appeared before them and began pulling her towards the living room. She disappeared before Dustin could finish.

He turned around, his face nearly matching the bright red plush carpet they were standing on. They were all silent except for Lucas, who was keeled over, hands on his knees, laughing uncontrollably.

"You – you told – " he gasped, "The host! The freaking *host* of the party that her costume was – was lame!" he managed to choke out between fits of laughter.

Dustin looked like he was waiting for someone to dig his grave. "Not one of my finest moments, I'll admit," he mumbled.

Will moved forward then, clapping a hand on his shoulder. "Don't sweat it, alright? Let's just go in," he said, glancing back to the rest of the group. "We made it all the way here, so let's just tough it out, even if it's just for an hour. Sound good?"

Will the Wise and his final words.

Mike lead the way, towing El behind him. They filed through a narrow hallway that lead to the kitchen, where they were greeted by another thick crowd. Some kind of drinking game was happening by the long counter at the back of the room. It was being led by the group of senior guys wearing the Halloween masks, which they had pulled up over their heads in order to chug from red cups.

Yep, not our scene – definitely not our scene.

They gathered by the stove, where a girl dressed as Madonna was serving people red punch from a giant glass bowl. Lucas was studying her intently.

"If we don't have costumes, we should at least have a red cup," he

said, turning to the rest of them. "Just for a prop."

None of them had really drank before. There was one night this past summer where Lucas's parents had gone out of town and during a sleepover, on a fleeting teenage whim, they'd stolen some of his Dad's beer from the basement fridge. They'd each only made it a few sips before deciding it was gross – mainly because Dustin had gotten ambitious and drank it too quickly, resulting in a mess of bubbles spurting from his nose. They hadn't felt very encouraged after witnessing that.

But they were in serious need of a boost in morale, so everyone agreed, and Lucas nervously approached the girl serving punch. "Can we uh – can we get five, please?" he asked, timid.

The girl gave him a measured look, and after a moment she reached for the ladle resting next to the bowl. "No costume, Sinclair?"

Lucas raised his eyebrows in immediate surprise, and Mike stifled a laugh. It was rare for Lucas to get caught off guard; he always took pride in his calm, collected demeanor.

"Y-you know my name?" Lucas replied, and then Mike heard Dustin snort with laughter.

"Yeah, we're in biology together," the girl replied, clearly unimpressed. She adjusted the mess of pearl necklaces that seemed to be the centerpiece of her costume.

"Oh," was all Lucas said. Mike could see his mind whirring, trying to think of what to say next.

God, they were all hopeless at interacting with members of the opposite sex.

The girl was already filling up the third cup and she kept passing the full ones to Will, who was standing on her other side. One eventually landed in Mike's hand, and he passed it to El. She raised it to her nose.

"You don't have to drink it," he told her. He didn't even want to think about what was in the punch. He followed her lead and took a whiff

of it, nearly choking as the pungent sting of alcohol hit the back of his throat. God, how were those senior dudes *chugging* this stuff?

El didn't reply, and Mike watched as she took a cautious sip. She frowned, smacking her lips together. "It's not that bad."

He was in the middle of trying it himself as she spoke, and he did everything in his power not to spit it out and cough, which was his immediate desire as soon as the too-sweet, alcohol-laden juice hit his lips. If El didn't find it that bad, he wasn't about to admit that it was too strong for him – way too strong.

He just nodded, and El gave him a sly smile. She could definitely tell.

Mike glanced back to find Lucas engaged in conversation – actual, real conversation – with the punch/Madonna girl. Will and Dustin had shifted away from them and were talking to a couple of guys that Mike vaguely recognized from the school's radio station.

He felt El tug on his shirtsleeve, and he turned to her. "You okay?" she asked. He slid closer to her, placing his hand on the small of her back.

"Of course."

It was still early in the night, but for what was probably the millionth time already, Mike admired how beautiful she looked. Granted, she always looked beautiful, but there was something a little different about tonight. She was wearing jeans that looked a little newer than her usual faded pairs, and a fitted black t-shirt with a long white cardigan, both items Mike had never seen on her before. She'd pinned her curls back on one side, so there was nothing obscuring her face when she smiled – that was the best part.

He leaned down toward her ear. "You look so beautiful," he said quietly. She blushed, and Mike couldn't help but grin.

Cheers erupted from the nearby counter where the drinking game was going on, and people continued to file into the kitchen. A girl dressed as a French painter, beret and all, squeezed through the cluster of people just in front of Mike and El, making a beeline for the

fridge. She reached for the door handle before noticing them standing there, and Mike saw that she was frowning at El.

Oh no.

"Hey, you're in my art class. Jane, right?"

Art class?

El looked nervous at first, but recognition slowly dawned on her. "Oh – um, yeah, I am. It's... you're..." she trailed off.

"Susannah," the girl replied, smiling.

"Right," El replied, "Sorry."

The girl shrugged, fiddling with the paintbrushes tucked into a black apron at the front of her costume. "No worries. You did that really good still life, right? The one of – what was it, again?"

"A bike," El mumbled. She glanced shyly at Mike, her blush deepening.

Oh.

"Right!" the girl exclaimed. "That was like – so good."

El's eyes were alight with excitement. "You think?"

"Um, yeah, I do," Susannah said, laughing. "Mr. Stephens said it was the best one he's seen since he started teaching."

What?

Mike had never heard anything about this. Judging by the sketches she'd left on her paper cranes, he knew El was talented at drawing. But he had no idea she was taking art or that she'd been praised by Mr. Stephens, who was a hard marker, notorious at Hawkins for his harsh in-class critiquing sessions.

Susannah moved into the corner next to El, and the two of them were quickly off in conversation, talking animatedly about an upcoming

painting assignment.

Mike shuffled his way back over to Will and Dustin, who were still talking to the two guys from the school radio. Lucas was nowhere to be seen, and before he could ask, Dustin leaned over to fill him in. "He disappeared with that Madonna girl," he said in a hushed voice. Oh. At least one of them was redeeming themselves from the no-costume blunder.

Mike stood there, comfortably listening to the conversation, which was focused on complaining about people who left messes in the AV room. After a few minutes, he felt El's hand on his arm.

"Susannah's going to show me where the bathroom is," she told him, gesturing back to where they'd been standing. He noticed her cup of punch had been refilled.

"Okay," Mike said, uneasy at the thought of losing sight of her. He knew it was silly, but after seeing how nervous she'd been when they arrived, he was worried about her. "Are you sure? I can bring you."

She shook her head. "I'll be fine," she said, turning to follow Susannah.

Mike watched the two of them leave the room. Will was beside him, doing the same. "Did you know that El was taking art?" he asked.

Will nodded. "She's shown me some of her drawings. She's really good."

"What?"

"Is that so surprising?" Will said, laughing.

"No, but I mean..." *Why hasn't she shown me any?* Mike thought, leaving that part out. Will was also very talented at drawing – he always had been, even when they were kids. So it wasn't surprising, really, that El would have shared some of her work with him. Mike wasn't jealous, exactly – if anything, he felt left out, as childish as it seemed. He wanted to be the person El shared everything with. He wanted to know everything there was to know about her, be able to revel in the things she loved, even if he didn't understand them.

"Mr. Stephens said one of her drawings was the best he'd ever seen," he said.

Will nodded, smiling. "The one of the bike?"

Again, Mike couldn't mask his disbelief. "You've seen it?"

"Mike," Will said, which really meant, *Don't be an idiot*. "You're not her only friend, you know."

The crowd in the kitchen grew ever thicker, and after a while, Mike could no longer get a clear view of the doorway to see if El had come back.

He was actually enjoying himself, becoming enmeshed in conversation as Will poured him another cup of punch. But he was careful not to lose track of time, and as the minutes passed, he grew worried about El. He guessed she'd been gone for about half an hour and even though she was probably fine, the crowded doorway put his nerves on edge.

He nudged Will's arm. "I'm going to go find El," he said, "If I'm not back in half an hour, assume I've been swallowed up by the crowd and come and save me."

Will just nodded. "Sure thing."

Mike hurried past the group of seniors still facilitating the drinking game he'd now defined in his head as Chug-Cheer-Chug. That was all they appeared to be doing, so it seemed fitting.

Getting through the narrow hallway was nearly impossible; the living room was at full capacity, and people had spilled out into the surrounding areas.

"Jesus," Mike muttered to himself as he watched a guy in front of him stumble forward and spill his entire cup of punch onto a senior girl's ballerina costume. A series of high-pitched shrieks ensued, and Mike darted toward the front door.

He was halfway up the large spiral staircase when he spotted El, who

was just descending from the top. She was moving slowly, gripping the railing with both hands. Her steps were shaky, as though she was – *Oh, no* – drunk.

"Mike!" she exclaimed when she saw him. He jogged up the rest of the steps and when he reached her she practically jumped on him, flinging her arms around his neck.

"Are you okay?"

She sighed, and her breath was warm against his skin. "Can we go outside?" she asked, pulling back to look at him. She squeezed her eyes shut. "It's too... too much."

Mike wrapped one of her arms around his shoulder and gripped her side, helping her down the rest of the stairs. She groaned when she saw the crowd, and Mike decided to head straight for the front door. It would take longer to get around to the back of the house where he knew it would be quiet, but he wanted to get out of there as soon as possible.

"What happened to Susannah?" he asked.

El's steps became a little steadier as they reached the landing. "She had to go talk to someone."

And she left you by yourself? Mike thought, anger settling low in his gut. But he held back, not wanting to upset El any further.

They stumbled outside, El still clinging to Mike's side even though they were finally clear of the crowds. He steered them along the side of the house toward the backyard. They reached the steps of the large wooden porch and sat down.

The property backed onto a few acres of forest, and the branches of the tall trees lining the edge of the yard swayed in the cool night air. Aside from a few people smoking near the back door, no one was outside, and Mike revelled in the welcome silence.

El was bent forward, her elbows resting on her knees. She cradled her head in her hands, and he could hear her measured breathing. He slid close to her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

"Hey," he said, moving his head down to hers. "You okay?"

She didn't say anything, instead dropping an arm and leaning into his side. She grabbed the front of Mike's shirt, anchoring him to her. He listened as her breaths slowly evened out.

"I'm okay now," she said finally. "It was just... too much noise. Too much everything."

He knew exactly what she meant. It wasn't just the insufferably loud music or the yelling and cheering and noisy chatter. It was the exhausting pace of social interaction; most of it shallow at best.

She lifted her head then and looked at Mike. "This is better," she said, shifting to face him. "I like being with just you."

Mike was grateful for the dim glow of the porch light so she couldn't see him turn what he was sure was a deep shade of red. He didn't know if she meant the double meaning to her words, but it felt special to him anyway.

"Me too, El."

They were looking at each other and Mike wanted nothing more than to kiss her like he'd been dying to do all night. But something made him stay put.

El raised a hand and brought it slowly to Mike's cheek, brushing her fingers along his jawline. She did the same on the other side, until she was carefully holding Mike's face in her hands.

He watched as she studied him; she brushed her thumbs along his freckles, played with the curls at his temples. He stayed as still as he could. She moved closer. "Beautiful," she whispered.

Mike resisted the urge to smile and risk moving her hands from their place. For some reason he knew that she wasn't just saying it because that's what he'd called her earlier. It was as if she'd been waiting to tell him, waiting for a time like this when it would be just them and she'd get a chance to show him, too.

El brushed a thumb across his bottom lip and Mike couldn't help it;

he captured it in a kiss before she could move it away. She smiled. This time it was she who leaned forward to kiss him, moving her hands to rest at the back of his neck.

Mike kissed her back carefully, thinking she might still be a little shaken. But he was surprised to find her quickening the pace, pressing herself even closer to him.

There had been something shy about their previous kisses. Not that they lacked any sort of passion, but there was a reticence, mostly on Mike's part, to let it go on unabated. Not because he didn't want to – *God*, he did – but because he never wanted to push her in any way or rush her into something neither of them was ready for. Plus, he wasn't sure how much she really knew about relationships or intimacy or anything like that. She wasn't naive, and he didn't know much either, but still – he didn't want to do something she wasn't comfortable with.

But now, any hint of shyness seemed to have disappeared. The kiss grew more intense, and as El gasped slightly against his mouth, Mike was grateful they were sitting, because the phrase 'weak in the knees' suddenly held real meaning.

She leaned into him, closer and closer until finally, without breaking the kiss, she placed a hand on his knee and climbed up onto his lap. Mike froze. *Oh good God*. He leaned back slightly. "El – "

But she didn't let him finish, cutting him off with her lips, kissing him in that hungry way he'd never felt before. He clung desperately to her waist, her skin warm under his fingers. His head was hazy, swimming, and he could taste the sweetness of the punch on her lips. She kept one hand buried in his hair and grazed the other along his neck and shoulder, fingers dipping below his collar.

She moved her lips away from his then, and began to trace kisses along the exposed skin. Mike was certain she could feel his erratic pulse, the way his heart seemed to skip and speed up with every passing second. He felt like he couldn't breathe, let alone form a proper sentence, but he had to do something or else this would go somewhere he wasn't sure he wanted it to, not with the state El was in.

"El, I – I think we..." she placed a kiss just below his ear. *Shit.* "We should – "

"Go inside?" she mumbled. She moved back so they were face to face. Her eyes were wide, her skin flushed. "Somewhere... private?"

Oh. Oh.

The last thing – the *very* last thing – Mike wanted to do was reject her, but he didn't know how to handle her suggestion without it coming across like that. *Am I being a complete idiot?*

"I – I mean, yeah, but I... don't you think we should talk? About – about – " he struggled for the right words, feeling even more frantic as her face fell in disappointment.

Just then, the sound of shouting pierced into the night, coming from somewhere in the dark yard before them. They both winced, looking around for the source of the noise. Mike could hear feet shuffling on grass, and then a sharp thud, as though someone had lost their footing.

"Little dweeb, you thought you could just run away from us!"

It was a voice Mike didn't recognize, deep and booming, definitely belonging to someone older. El ambled off his lap, and his heart sank. The late October air stung without her warm body next to his.

There was another sharp thud, and this time it sounded distinctly like a punch – the bang of a fist connecting with its target.

"Please," came a strained voice, "It was an accident."

Mike and El exchanged frightened glances as they rose from the steps. They walked cautiously toward the far corner of the deck, where the noise was coming from.

A group of people came into view in the faded orange hue of the porch light. Three people were standing in a circle and Mike recognized them as the senior guys with the *Halloween* masks, though they were no longer wearing them. A figure was on the ground below, writhing in pain.

One of the seniors spoke. "Bullshit it was an accident. First you take our booze out of the fridge, and then I catch you going through my jacket?" With those words, he gave a short kick to the figure on the ground, who subsequently cried out in pain. "Didn't seem like an accident to me."

"I – I thought they were mine – honest mistake," the figure gasped. "Please – please, I swear."

Mike didn't recognize him, but he was definitely younger than his aggressors. He looked like he could even be a freshman.

"What do you think, Joe?" The senior who had just delivered the kick said. "Was it an *honest* mistake?"

Joe shook his head. "Didn't look like one. Looked like he knew what he was doing."

Another kick. A scream, more writhing. The seniors were all laughing now.

"El, we should go inside, I don't think – " Mike began, whispering. But when he turned, she wasn't there. She was making her way down the porch steps, right toward the commotion.

Oh God, no.

Mike hurried after her, fear prickling his skin. What the hell was she doing?

"Hey!" El shouted. "Leave him alone."

The laughter paused for a moment and Mike could see the group of seniors searching around for the source of the voice. El charged ahead.

"Excuse me?"

It was the one who'd given the first kick, the ringleader. He stepped away from the group and his eyes widened in suspicion as El approached. Mike could see him sizing her up, and a sick feeling came over him.

"I said, *leave him alone*," El repeated. "He said it was an accident."

"Why don't you mind your own business," the guy scoffed. He walked over to the boy, who was still slumped on the ground, and raised his foot, stomping it down hard on his shoulder. The boy yelped in agony. "You think someone who whines like a little girl just made an honest mistake?"

Mike finally caught up and grabbed El's arm. "El, come on – it's okay," he whispered, pulling her back. But with a strong jerk of her shoulder, she shoved him off.

She moved forward.

The senior rested his foot on the boy's shoulder, like he was keeping his place. "What do you think you're doing, sweetie?"

He was taunting her now, but El didn't waver.

"Go. Right now."

He laughed, looking back at the other two. "Can you believe this?" He glared at El. "I'm not going anywhere until I'm done with him."

He backed up and raised his foot again, higher than before. But just before the kick came down, he froze, stumbling backward as though someone had pushed him. He was on his back, legs in the air, before any of them knew what was happening.

El.

Mike tried to grab her again but she shot a hand backwards, using her powers to hold him in place.

Bewildered, the senior started to get up. "Get the hell out of here, you little shit!" he yelled, stepping toward her.

The freshman boy had risen to his knees and was ambling forward, towards the house. "Hey!" one of the seniors shouted, "Not so fast." But in the instant that he reached for the boy's shirt he was forced backward, propelled a few feet before landing hard on the grass.

Mike could sense the shift in the air, the awareness that something was not quite right. No one moved.

El spoke, cold and low and threatening. "Go." Her right hand was raised a little, and Mike could see it quivering.

"You think I'm afraid of you?" the ringleader said, getting back up on his feet. He moved over to where the freshman was, inching forward, and hauled him up, fist raised. "I swear, if you think – "

But before he could throw the punch, a beer bottle from the porch railing came soaring toward him, hurtling directly at his head. He ducked just in time to avoid it, and it hit a nearby tree, smashing to pieces.

"What in the – "

"I said, go!" El was screaming now.

She gave the senior another shove backwards with her powers, and he stumbled. He and the other rushed to help their friend up, and then the three of them scurried to the side of the house. "We're not finished!" the ringleader yelled over his shoulder. But the freshman boy had already made it up the porch steps and into the house.

The weighted force that had been keeping Mike in place lifted and he rushed to El, who had fallen to her knees. She was taking deep, gasping breaths, and in addition to the blood trailing from her nostrils, a steady trickle was coming out of both ears. Even in the darkness Mike could see that she was pale – too pale.

"El, El, come on, it's okay, come here," he murmured, frantic. She slumped against him, her eyes half open. Oh God no, oh no, oh no.

He tried to drag her up to standing, but she wasn't moving. "El please, El," he begged, panic rising in his throat. He shook her, but she only groaned.

"Mike?"

It was dark, but Mike didn't need to be able to see to know who it was. He looked behind him to find Will rushing down the porch

steps. He hurried toward them, and Mike saw his features darken at the sight of El's face, now smeared with blood.

"What happened, Mike – what's going on." It was the first time since they were kids that he heard real fear in Will's voice.

"Will... please, I need your help."

Please leave your thoughts and comments! And if you'd like to send any ST writing prompts or questions, please feel free to do so on Tumblr, writer-lia :)

11. Chapter 11

Author's note: Hi everyone! So sorry for taking a while to update. Just one thing: beware the angst!

One two three four one two three four one two three four Mike repeated in his mind, watching his feet shuffle over the pavement. He was counting his steps, a habit he'd developed as a kid when he was nervous and needed a way to calm down. He hadn't done it in years. But now, with El slumped against him, Will hoisting her up on the other side as they hurried away from Jennifer's house, he'd begun doing it subconsciously.

One two three four almost there almost there.

El seemed vaguely aware of her surroundings, but she couldn't form a coherent sentence or stand up on her own. So Mike and Will held her, their collective shadows cast onto the pavement as one looming, staggering figure.

Will hadn't asked any questions when they were still in the yard. Instead, he'd taken charge, calming Mike down and steering them in the direction of a payphone a few blocks away – *We have to call Hopper*, he'd said. Even though Mike knew that was the most rational course of action, the thought of having to explain what happened to the Chief filled him with a cold, deep fear.

As they rounded the corner away from Jennifer's house, Mike felt the jumble of words in his head begin to untangle, desperate to escape. "She has – she's – there are things about her..." he blurted, unsure how to go on. *Breathe breathe breathe come on.* "She made me promise not to tell," he said weakly.

"It's okay," Will replied. "Let's just get her out of here."

The payphone turned out to be further away than expected, and by the time they reached it Mike's feet ached, his neck strained from having El clutch onto him. They walked around to the side that faced

away from the road and lowered her to the ground, leaning her back against the base of the booth. She groaned, her head lolling to the side. Once she was settled Will stood up, but Mike stayed crouched down in front of her. Now that there were no steps left to count, he was able to fully focus – his eyes skated over her pale skin, the dried blood under her nose and ears, her shallow breathing.

How could you let this happen?

"Mike," Will said, snapping him out of his reverie. He felt a hand on his shoulder. "We have to get her home."

They hurried into the phone booth, each of them scrambling in their pockets for change. Mike looked up at the circular number pad. "Shit," he said.

"What?"

"I don't know her number."

He looked at Will, his hands beginning to shake in panic. They were too far from Jennifer's house to go back and check. But to his surprise, Will sighed in what seemed to be resignation.

"I do."

Mike couldn't help his surprised exclaim. "You do? How?"

Will shrugged, visibly uncomfortable. He moved in front of Mike and nudged him out of the way, reaching for the number pad.

"The Chief and my Mom hang out sometimes," he mumbled as he lifted the receiver. He looked shyly at Mike. "Don't say anything about it, okay?"

In another situation this would've been a big deal and Mike would've pressed him for details. But the phone was already ringing, and his panic over El and having to talk to the Chief took precedent. He grabbed the receiver and Will left the booth, heading back out toward El.

The line clicked on halfway through the second ring, indicating that

someone had picked up. Mike gulped. He hadn't had more than a few seconds to think about what the hell he was going to say.

"El?"

The Chief's voice was gruff, like he'd been woken from sleep – but the note of worry was unmistakable. Mike's heart sank. He clearly thought it was El calling him in trouble. The fact that it sounded like he'd been expecting it made it all the more awful. Mike could just imagine the conversation they'd had when he dropped her off before the party.

If anything goes wrong, you just call me, okay? I'll be there.

"N-no, Chief, Hi – it's, it's me."

A sharp inhalation. "Mike?"

It was the first time he'd addressed him by his first name.

"Yeah, it's – Chief, I think – "

"What happened," he interrupted. "Where is she?"

"She's – she's with me," Mike replied, "But I – something happened. I just... I don't know what's wrong."

He could hear shuffling, the sound of something slamming. "Where are you?"

Mike swallowed. *Breathe breathe breathe.* "The first payphone outside of Loch Nora. Do you know where that – "

"I'll be there in ten minutes. Don't move."

The line went dead.

Mike lowered the receiver, the sound of the dial tone suddenly deafening. Two beats of fear thudded in his chest: one driven by the Chief's inevitable anger at Mike for putting El at risk, and the second for El, who still hadn't risen to her feet. He felt useless, standing there with the grimy black phone handle clutched to his chest.

But like always, his fear for El was stronger than anything else. He walked out of the booth and over to where she sat.

Will was kneeling beside her but when Mike approached he stood up, ushering him toward the spot as if he'd been holding it for him. As soon as he took it El shifted, leaning her head on his shoulder.

"He on the way?"

Mike nodded.

Will glanced around. "I uh – I don't think I should be around when he gets here," he said. "I mean – if there are things I shouldn't know..." he trailed off.

He was right. But Mike felt bad that he'd helped carry El all the way out there and would now have to walk back to the party alone.

"I don't want you to have to – " Mike began, but Will held a hand up.

"I'll tell them that El got sick and you had to bring her home, okay?"

Will the Wise, and evidently also the mind reader.

There was a pause in which the weight of everything unsaid hung between them, every secret that couldn't be told but was somehow understood as having to stay that way.

Will started to walk away, but he only made it a few steps before stopping short. He turned back, frowning at Mike.

"That drawing she did, of your bike?"

"Yeah?"

"I asked her why she chose it. She said Mr. Stephens told them to pick something that represented something meaningful... something they associated with good memories." He smiled then. "Something that would make them happy every time they looked at it."

No words – no adequate ones anyway – came to Mike. His heart swelled with a deep knowing, an intense wave of emotion that

always came when El was next to him. He looked down at her, still crumpled up against his side, and shifted his arm to encircle her body.

"Thanks, Will," he said.

Will nodded, and then he took off into the night.

There were no steps to count anymore but Mike's head was whirring, in desperate need of something other than the immediate fear to focus on. He trained his eyes on the streetlights, an orange blur streaking across the pitch black night. Too many to count. Too much.

It had all happened so fast: the Blazer pulling up on the shoulder of the road, gravel and dirt kicking up in the wake of its tires. The door slamming, Hopper scooping up El in his arms, barking at Mike to follow and hold on to her in the backseat. The rushed explanations, the rapid-fire questions after every word, and then the refrain that had brought Mike an unprecedented amount of relief: *It's happened before.*

It had happened when she'd used her powers too much, or too quickly, or with too much force and anger and impulsiveness that it drained all of her energy. It knocked her out, but after hours of good rest she'd be alright, the Chief had said.

Now he could breathe. The first, ever-present fear had ebbed a little, for now.

And though the second one was still there, Hopper hadn't given it a reason to roil up. More than anything, like Mike, he was worried. He hadn't gotten angry – at least not yet. The latter half of the car ride was quiet, with Mike focused on nothing but cradling El against him and the haze of the streetlights, which diminished slowly as they drove further into the woods.

It was another flurry of activity when they finally reached the cabin. Hopper yanked the backseat door open and again gathered El in his arms, Mike trailing awkwardly behind as they made their way inside. Hopper steered them toward what he guessed was El's room. There

was a pause and Mike felt frozen again, like he had outside the phone booth.

Hopper looked over his shoulder and raised an eyebrow. "Door, kid?" he said, evidently out of breath.

Mike shook his head back and forth quickly, startling himself into action. "R-right yeah of course, here um –" he moved forward and opened the door. He was surprised to find that when he did, he was almost all the way into the room. In one quick glance he took it in: a small bed, a dresser with a stack of books on top, some drawings pinned to the wall, and of course – paper cranes. Tons of them.

Mike took a few steps back as Hopper filed in behind him. He was about to leave the room when Hopper called out again.

"Kid, grab a glass of water, will you?"

Mike was grateful to have an excuse to move, to do something useful. He hurried away into the kitchen and filled a tall glass of water. He returned and gave it to the Chief, who immediately poured a little onto a rag he'd pulled out from his jacket. He began to wipe underneath El's nose in gentle, careful strokes.

Feeling again like he was intruding on something, Mike cleared his throat. "I'll uh – I'll grab another towel," he said. He waited for a response but the Chief was zeroed in on El, pouring more water onto the rag and continuing his movements.

When Mike returned the Chief took the fresh towel from him, still not saying anything, and washed away the blood around El's ears this time. When he was done he nudged her to the side, bundling her in the bedsheets as she turned over. There was a pause, both of them hovering there, wearing the same worried look as they watched her drift further into sleep.

The Chief stood after a moment and Mike backed up a little, still uneasy.

"Let's get some air," he said, exhaustion coloring his voice. He was halfway out the door before Mike could respond.

They settled out on the porch, the Chief leaning against the railing and Mike taking a seat on the small wooden swing next to the door. He rocked it back and forth slowly, his feet dragging. The Chief reached into his jacket and pulled out a cigarette, lighting it up with a relieved exhale.

The cool air felt welcoming, the gentle breeze helping slow down the pace of Mike's heart.

"You didn't make her drink, did you?"

Mike's head snapped up to attention. "What? No, of course not. I lost track of where she was and..." he trailed off, realizing how bad that sounded. "When I found her, I guess she'd been, I don't know – "

"It's alright," the Chief interrupted, taking a long drag from his cigarette. "I know what those parties are like."

He frowned and shook his head, like he was trying to work something out in his mind. "The thing is, I want her to do stuff like that. Normal teenage stuff – within *reason*, obviously," he said, cocking an eyebrow at Mike. "But then I know it's not the same for her as it is for everyone else her age. And that scares the hell out of me."

Mike burrowed his chin into the collar of his sweater, thinking through the Chief's words. He got a sense of what he was talking about, but Mike knew there was nothing he could say that would be even remotely comforting.

"I'm just saying, though, kid," the Chief continued. "That she might seem ready for things, but you have to be careful. If you push her into..."

What?

Mike thought back to the porch at Jennifer's house, El climbing into his lap, the breathless way she'd said, Somewhere private?

"I-I wouldn't. I swear," he blurted. "I... I love her."

Mike resisted the urge to clap a hand over his mouth, like a little kid

who had said a bad word. He was shocked – not that he felt that way about El, but that he had said the words out loud instead of in his head.

They'd been on his mind nonstop for the past week, a relentless chant getting louder each time he was around her; when she took his hand or smiled or asked him a question. *I love you I love you I love you*. But he hadn't told her. Not because he wasn't sure of it, but because he had no idea how she'd react, and he was terrified.

So instead, he blurted it out to the Chief – the person tasked with protecting her at all costs. The person he was still very much afraid of. Hopper sighed, leaning back against the porch railing. Mike shoved his hands into his pockets and kept his eyes on the ground.

After a few moments of unbearable silence he looked up to find Hopper studying him. He wore his usual scowl, but there was something else - fear, maybe? Anger?

Mike wondered if this was it – if he was finally going to get the kick in the teeth he was sure the Chief had been wanting to give him since that first day in the parking lot. He mentally braced himself, but seconds passed and still nothing happened.

Finally, he spoke. "Does she know that?"

Mike was surprised to hear a hint of resignation in his voice, as if he'd been waiting for this.

He shook his head. "I haven't told her, but... I'm sure she knows, in some way."

Hopper sighed again and raised a hand to scratch his beard.

"Look, kid. You can't have... She wasn't raised like you and me, okay? She doesn't understand things like we do. Hell, she's hardly talked to more than ten people outside that lab."

"I know that," Mike said. He knew El wasn't cared for or loved there - and if she was, it was in some twisted kind of way.

He looked back up at the Chief, who was still studying him intently.

"But she knows how you and I treat her is different. We've showed her – I mean I've tried to," Mike said.

Hopper folded his arms across his chest. "You were the first person to show her real kindness other than me," he began. "And if something goes wrong she'll get confused, she'll-I –" he stopped and brought a hand to his mouth, looking away.

Mike was surprised to see a resolute sadness take over his face. His Mom's voice echoed in his head – *Losing a child... that's not something you ever recover from*. And then he understood. El was the Chief's second chance, and he was afraid to screw it up.

"I promised her that she could trust me," Mike said. It was all he could come up with. "I understand if you don't but... she can't disappoint me, if that's what you mean."

"You say that, but..." the Chief trailed off, then looked back up at Mike with a steely glare. "I know you've been patient with her. She's not used to that. She's used to something messed up. If you get frustrated and lose your –"

"I won't," Mike interrupted, his voice rising. He didn't mean to sound desperate, but the thought of getting angry or annoyed with El made his stomach churn. He would never lose his patience with her, he was sure of it.

"She won't *want* to disappoint you – that I know for sure," the Chief said. "But it'll take her a long time to really get over what happened. People I worked with, they would tell me all the time – kids who have been through really shitty things might never learn how to... be with people, in the right way. She only started calling me 'Dad' right before she went to school."

Mike was surprised. The way El said it made it seem like that's what she'd always called him.

"So I'm just telling you," Hopper said, his tone becoming even more serious. "That if you have expectations about how she's –"

"I don't," Mike interrupted. He fought the fear roiling inside him and

looked at the Chief straight on, hoping his eyes would convey his honesty.

Hopper shook his head. "You might not. But kid..." he trailed off as if he were debating whether to finish the sentence. "The more you love someone, the more they can disappoint you."

Mike had been leaning forward, ready to say something. But at those words he sat all the way back against the porch swing, feeling defeated.

Maybe the Chief was jaded, but Mike couldn't deny the truth of what he'd said. Loving someone made the stakes higher in every sense.

He knew because the more of it he felt for El, the more he also felt other things. He worried about her more, feared for her more, felt that twist of anger and disgust get stronger each time she talked about the lab. He loved her entirely; and with that came an exact reflection in which every other emotion was amplified, brought into the sharpest focus.

It was quiet for a while, the still night air punctuated only by the faint creaking of the porch swing as Mike rocked it back and forth. He was the one to break the silence this time.

"Do you think she's happy?"

On a basic level, it was a stupid question – anyone who'd been around El in the last month or so knew that at least from the outside, she seemed happy. *Really* happy. She smiled more, and was a loyal one-woman audience to Dustin's antics, laughing at nearly everything he said. She was much less shy and wanted to be close to Mike at all times; she always sat pressed up against his side at lunch, or in the AV room. Thinking about it made him blush.

But he still wasn't sure – he could still see that scared look in her eyes sometimes, sensed her unease. She was still hard on herself about not knowing what certain words meant, and she was always questioning if she was acting properly – "normal", as she called it, even though Mike kept telling her there was no such thing as normal, that normal was boring.

Hopper shook his head, frowning. "Happy?" he said, smiling to himself. "Kid, I think unbridled joy is the better term."

They both laughed, and Mike felt a tiny glimmer of relief.

Hopper flicked his finished cigarette over the railing. "Listen, it's late," he said, standing up all the way. "I know she's fine but... I'm nervous to leave her here alone."

Mike stood up from the swing, which creaked loudly in protest. "Oh right, of course, I can uh – don't worry, I'll – I'll walk, or something, I mean – "

Hopper threw him an incredulous look. "Don't be ridiculous, Wheeler. You can take the couch."

Oh.

They started to walk inside. "You can use our phone, maybe just to let your parents know, or – "

"They won't care."

It sounded harsh, but it was true. There were many nights, especially since Nancy had gone away to college, where Mike had ended up staying over at his friend's houses after late-night hangouts and had forgotten to tell his parents. The first time it happened his Mom scolded him a little, but after that they'd all but stopped caring, assuming each time that he was with one of the same three people he was always with. And they were always right. Except for this time.

Hopper looked eager to get some sleep, the weariness of the evening beginning to show at the corners of his eyes. He rummaged through a closet next to the bathroom and threw a mess of blankets in Mike's direction. Mike only half caught them before a pillow was being hurtled toward him.

After a moment he set both down on the old brown couch in front of him. He and Hopper looked at each other.

"Alright, well..." the Chief said, looking toward El's room. "It goes without saying, but don't go – "

"I won't," Mike interrupted, trying to stifle the embarrassing warning that was to come. Hopper just nodded and opened the door opposite the bathroom, bidding Mike goodnight with a dismissive wave.

Mike didn't think there was any way he'd fall asleep after everything that had happened, but as soon as he settled onto the couch, his body sank right into the scratchy fabric, his eyelids going heavy. His mind was trained on the odd way that he could acutely feel El's presence on the other side of the door, just a few feet in front of him.

One phrase echoed in his mind, strong and deliberate. *I love you I love you I love you.*

Mike's eyes flew open in a panic. Rather than the gradual coming into consciousness he was used to, a loud thud somewhere close by had jarred him right awake. He sat up, the disorienting feeling of realizing he was somewhere other than his own bedroom washing over him and then dissipating as quickly as it came.

El.

He turned around to find her crouching behind him, picking up a book from the floor by the window. She was dressed in a pair of dark blue sweatpants and the familiar *HAWKINS P.D.* sweater, her curls mussed from sleep.

A familiar sensation of calm settled onto Mike's skin for the first time in what felt like days.

"El," he breathed, kicking the blankets off and getting up from the couch.

She stood up, placing the book back on the table beside her. As soon as Mike reached her, he wrapped his arms around her, tucking her head under his chin. "El," he said again, more for himself than anything. She was really there. She was really okay.

It took him a few seconds to realize that she wasn't hugging him back – that in fact she'd gone stiff against him, as if he were a stranger who'd mistaken her for someone else. Mike pulled back but kept his

hands just below her shoulders. She looked up at him, dark shadows under her eyes, her skin still a little pale.

"Sorry to wake you," she said quietly. "I didn't mean to." Her voice was hollow, almost deadpan. A strange panic began to rise in Mike's throat.

She's probably still exhausted, he thought.

"It's okay. How are you feeling?" he said, running a thumb over her forehead.

"Fine," she replied, still in that hollow voice.

Mike looked around. "Where's your Dad?"

"He had to go in to the station to deal with something. But he said he'd be back in about...." she craned her neck past Mike and squinted at the clock, "ten minutes." She met his eyes again. "To drive you home."

"Oh."

What's going on?

"I'm just... I'm so glad you're okay," he said. He leaned down to kiss her forehead but to his surprise El flinched away from him, as if he'd grabbed her too hard or something. He dropped his hands away. There was no way to stop the panic from stirring up now.

"What's wrong, El?"

His words seemed to break something. Mike watched as she took a gasping breath, her eyes instantly welling up with tears.

"I – I've been up for hours," she squeezed her eyes shut, like she was trying to block out a bad memory. "Just... thinking about how to say this."

"Say what?" Mike blurted, unable to hide the fear in his voice.

El glanced quickly around the room. "Let's... let's sit down."

"No El," he replied, desperate now. "Just tell me. Tell me what's going on."

She took another gasping breath. "Mike... what happened last night. It – I reacted that way for someone I didn't even know. Because it – it reminded..." she wiped at her tears furiously with the sleeve of her sweater. "It reminded me of the lab. Of being helpless, and – and weak. And having no one."

"Exactly El," Mike cut in, intent on turning things away from wherever they were going. "That's why you're amazing – that's why – "

"No," she said, her voice rising. "No, you don't understand." She looked up at him, her eyes dark and serious. "That level of anger, me using my powers... that was for someone I didn't know. What if it was Lucas or Will or Dustin? What if – " she paused, closing her eyes again, as though she couldn't bear the thought of what was to come next. "What if *you* were the one getting hurt."

"That won't – "

"What then, Mike?" she demanded. "I clearly can't control these... these abilities all the time. And if something happens and I do something even worse than last night, that's it. That's it for me, that's it for my Dad, that's it for *you*."

She was sobbing now, barely able to get the words out. "I can't live with that. I'm... I'm like a monster."

At that, Mike reached for her, his hands cupping her face gently. "El, please don't say that, come on. It's not true. You know it's not true. Nothing is going to – "

"You don't know that," she snapped back, again shirking away from his touch. "It's too dangerous, Mike. Even with people finding out about me. I – I can't ask you to be a part of this."

"But I want to be a part of it," Mike said, not caring anymore how desperate he sounded. He had to fix this. "I want to be with you." He was pleading now.

El covered her mouth with her hand, stifling another sob as tears flowed steadily down her cheeks. "I'm so sorry, Mike," she whispered.

For some reason, those were the words that made it real, that made it clear there was no way for him to fix it. She was sorry, but she couldn't be with him. She was sorry, but that was the way it had to be.

He heard it, but he didn't believe her. Not for one second. It couldn't be real – not after everything. And especially not after he promised he'd protect her.

I love you I love you I love you.

"El, please... I trust you. I know you won't hurt me, or – or anyone. It's going to be okay, I promise. You're just scared, and I – I get it, but..." he moved toward her only to find himself frozen in place, as if an invisible barrier had been put up.

She was using her powers on him. To keep him *away*.

The tears Mike had been holding back finally fell, and as he searched desperately for words, the sound of a car pulling up in the long driveway rumbled through the cabin. They both looked toward the door as the Blazer's unmistakable roar came closer.

El looked back at Mike wearily. "He didn't make me do this, just so you know," she said. It was a thought that had passed through Mike's mind fleetingly, and he wondered how El had picked up on it. She looked down at her feet.

"He trusts you," she said, wiping at her eyes again. "It... this was my decision."

No no no please I love you please.

The Blazer's horn blared and Mike jumped a little. The Chief was waiting to bring him home. Home, without El, without the promise of seeing her and being with her again.

"You have to go."

She was crying quietly, her faced now buried in the collar of her sweater.

Mike swallowed, gathering up every ounce of resolve he could muster. He was going to say what he knew he had to say, even though it would hurt like hell. Because he loved her. Because he wanted her to be safe.

"El... if this is what you really want, then I – I mean I don't understand, but I'll try to. But just know that I lo –" *No. Don't do that to her.* "That my promise is still true. You can trust me." He breathed evenly to keep his voice from betraying how broken he felt. "And I'd do anything. You know that. Anything."

He thought he could see the same pain reflected in her eyes. "I'm sorry," she whispered again.

The Chief honked his horn again, and at about the same time Mike jolted forward, the barrier lifted. She was letting him go.

He knew if he looked at her he'd lose all his resolve, so as he walked away he kept his eyes trained on the door. In a few strides he was there – one step further and he'd cross onto the side without El. The side where there might never be El again, with him.

He thought he heard her say goodbye as the door slammed behind him, but he wasn't sure, so he didn't say it back – he kept it in him, right next to the other steady refrain that he was sure now would never subside.

I love you I love you I love you.

Author's note: Just so everyone's aware, we've only got two chapters left! One more full chapter and then an epilogue, to be exact. Please leave comments, they mean the world! Thanks for reading :)

12. Chapter 12

In the past when El hadn't shown up to school, Mike was used to the wrench of disappointment every time he passed by the spots she could usually be found. He'd still go by her locker, pause in the cafeteria doorway, or linger for a few extra minutes at the bike rack, even if he knew the chances of seeing her were slim. Imagining that she might show up was marginally better than the idea of her not being there at all.

Not this time.

This time, he couldn't stand to be anywhere that reminded him of her, of the absence that ached constantly, like a second heartbeat. He took long detours to and from classes so that he wouldn't have to pass by her locker. When he could, he went in and out of the front doors only, and more than once he'd convinced his friends to eat somewhere other than the cafeteria. The most drastic measure he'd taken was giving up his Wednesday AV room duties to Dustin.

Will had eyed him suspiciously when he'd brought it up during AV club the week before, but Mike had avoided his gaze. He knew Dustin would love nothing more than to take over the role, delighted by the pseudo power the obnoxious key ring would afford him. Dustin really should've been the one doing it all along, but Mike was the President, the Paladin, the default leader.

Not this time. There was no way he could be in that room alone.

It was torturous enough having to go to AV club. The moments when the four of them fell silent to focus on something were instantly filled with images of El.

El, crouched near Lucas's chair, eyes wide, surprised and afraid and unsure. El, seated on the table, waiting, her whole body relaxing at the sight of him after they'd been apart. El, in his arms, her fingers toying with the curls at the nape of his neck, sighing against his lips. All of the moments he'd been foolish enough to believe were things he'd want to remember forever, not banish from his mind because they were too painful.

The visions of her still felt so fresh, and it would be agonizing if he had to be in the AV room alone.

He couldn't bear the disappointment, either. Hopper had told him on that awful car ride home from the cabin that El would have to lay low for a while, but he hadn't said how long. It was part of what made Mike want to avoid their usual spots, because he knew it would be met with that same pang of disappointment each time, and he had no way of knowing how long it would go on.

He knew his friends could tell something was up. But he'd suspected that Will had given Lucas and Dustin some kind of talking to, because they hadn't badgered him with questions like they normally would. He trusted that Will hadn't divulged anything, but he must've said something about not bringing up El, because they didn't. It was a strange and heavy weight in the air between them.

But the guilt Mike had felt over keeping things from them had been replaced with the only thing he was able to really feel - the ache of missing El, the second heartbeat that drummed away into nothingness.

She'd filled his world up, poured herself into spaces Mike didn't realize were hollow until he had her. Now that he didn't, there was nothing but emptiness.

As if being without El wasn't bad enough already, an interaction he'd had with her friend from art class, Susannah, had added another layer to the perpetual ache.

She'd come up to him the Monday after Jennifer's party, at his locker before lunchtime.

"Have you seen El today?"

It had taken him a second to register who she was, frowning for a moment before he remembered her painter's getup and the way she'd gushed over El's drawing. The drawing of Mike's bike. The one he hadn't known about until that moment and had never seen.

"Um, no," he'd said, trying to look distracted. Embarrassed, he was worried he wouldn't be able to talk about her without his voice catching.

"Hm. She wasn't in art class this morning."

Up until the party, Mike hadn't even known El was in an art class, let alone that it was on Monday mornings. He knew this girl didn't know that, but still, the question annoyed him for some reason.

He could only shrug.

"Weird," Susannah had said, "Well, sorry to bother you. I figured you'd know, since you're her..."

She trailed off, and it was impossible not to finish the sentence in his head - *boyfriend*.

"Since I'm her what?" Mike found himself blurting.

Susannah had blushed crimson, clearly caught off guard. "I - I'm sorry, I didn't mean to... insinuate anything. I guess... when I asked if you were her boyfriend, she just... frowned. She said she didn't know."

Mike froze, a bout of shame washing over him. *She said she didn't know.*

There was nothing to say in response, and Susannah seemed to realize that, so she'd sputtered out a few more apologies before hurrying off.

How could El have known, if he'd never even asked her? Never even bothered to make them official, assuming she wouldn't know what it meant, or wouldn't care? It was the millionth time in that short window since the party that he felt like a complete failure.

Part of him knew that judging by her reasoning, being her boyfriend wouldn't have made a difference when he was pleading with her at the cabin. But still - he should've explained things to her, told her that he wanted to be hers in that way, that he wanted other people to call them, in that silly high school way, *boyfriend girlfriend*.

He'd let that go, figuring it didn't matter. Now it mattered more than it ever should have. He'd let that go, he'd let her go, he'd walked away.

He never should've walked away.

It had been Dustin's idea to head to Benny's after school one day, insisting that fries and milkshakes had been sorely lacking for too long in all of their lives. Mike knew it was a covert attempt to cheer him up, which he appreciated. But he was sure it would only remind him of El. She'd been there, too, that Saturday when Mike had stumbled across the busy diner to invite her to the bookstore. Hawkins was starting to feel suffocating.

But in spite of himself, being in the crowded restaurant, squashed into a booth next to Dustin and his never ending antics did take his mind off of things, if not for a handful of moments. Those were beginning to be the only bit of respite he could count on - a moment here or there where he wasn't consumed by thoughts of El.

It was just past dinnertime when they finished up, and it was cold as they pedalled away from Benny's, their bike wheels creaking in the near-freezing air. They were halfway into November now and though they knew it was far too cold, like always, they were going to stretch biking season as long as they could.

The light was fading, long shadows closing in on the storefronts down the main street. As usual, they peeled away from the main road just before Melvald's, opting to take the gravel path behind the buildings, where they could fan out and bike lazily along without being disturbed by cars.

Mike and Will led the pack, pedalling in silence as Dustin and Lucas bickered on about something behind them.

Being behind the buildings didn't stop Mike from mentally noting when they passed the bookstore – he knew that block too well. The bookstore, where El had looked up at the stacks, mesmerized. The bookstore, where he had his first inkling that there was much more to El than he could've ever imagined.

A question came to him then, one he'd already gone over countless times.

If I'd known then how this would turn out, would I have still wanted it?

Just like every other time, he answered himself right away, the truth surging forward like a reflex.

Of course I would.

"Mike, did you hear me?"

Will's voice sounded distant, like he'd woken Mike from a dream. He'd been doing that a lot lately – zoning out while people were talking to him, or not paying attention at all.

"Sorry. What is it?"

"I said, have you tried to reach out to her?"

He snapped his head toward Will, anger unexpectedly spiking in his blood. "Why would I do that?"

Will shrugged. "I mean, maybe if she hears you out, she might – "

"She won't," Mike snapped back, interrupting so that he wouldn't have to hear him say that maybe she would change her mind - that thought had plagued him enough. He'd had to tell himself to banish it entirely, especially in the last few days, when the two-week mark had hit and there was still no sign of El at school.

"You say that," Will continued, "and I get it, but what if – "

"No, you don't get it, Will," Mike replied, his voice rising, "there are no what-ifs. She told me to go. She made me." Will couldn't understand, of course, that she had quite literally made him that day in the cabin – the invisible force field of her powers keeping them apart and signifying more to Mike than her words ever could.

"But she's probably scared, Mike, and I know I don't know everything, but I just have this feeling that – "

"Shut up Will!"

Mike almost stopped his bike, shocked at himself. He'd never spoken to his friends like that – especially not Will. But the anger he'd been bottling up, at home, at school, around his friends, came spilling out, spurred on by Will's good-natured prying. He already felt like a failure for letting El go. And Will didn't mean it, he knew, but the questions made him feel even more useless.

Will didn't say anything and Mike bit back his instinct to sputter out an apology. They biked on in silence for a moment before it became unbearable.

"Will, I – I'm sorry, I didn't mean – "

"It's alright, Mike, I shouldn't have said anything, I just, seeing you so sad, I wanted to – "

"No, it's not your fault," Mike interrupted. He glanced behind him to make sure Dustin and Lucas were out of earshot. "Talking about her just makes me so – I just feel like such an idiot, you know? This whole thing happened and I can't..."

But his trail of thought was interrupted by a chorus of shouting somewhere up ahead. He squinted, and not too far in the distance Mike could make out three figures, standing around at the side of one of the buildings.

An odd feeling of unease settled over him. He slowed his pedalling a little, but there was no point – the people were right in their path, and they were going to have to pass them eventually.

"Who is that?" Will asked, and Mike could sense the fear tinged in his voice.

The three figures came into closer view and Mike could see that they were all guys a little older than him.

One of them spoke, his deep voice echoing off the buildings and into the fading twilight. Mike instantly recognized it.

What do you think you're doing, sweetie?

It was the same trio from Jennifer's party.

He realized he'd let Will get ahead of him, and, desperate to warn him, he sped up. As he reached him Will stopped his bike, no more than ten feet shy of the group.

Mike followed Will's gaze to find that the seniors were distracted, busy spray painting the side of a building Mike recognized as the Hawk movie theater – the party's second favorite place, next to the arcade. They were scrawling obscene drawings of the male anatomy in black and red all over the brick wall, along with a slew of swear words.

"That's gonna take forever to get off," Will said, "as if that's what they needed."

The Hawk's owner had lost his wife to cancer earlier that year, and it was well known around town that he was struggling to keep the theater afloat on his own. Because he'd had to cut some staff, there was less supervision, and things had gone off the rails more than once. It wasn't uncommon for some sections of seats to be closed off for repairs, or for a double feature night to be called off early because gangs of older kids snuck alcohol in and got too rowdy.

The owner was definitely going to have to pay to get the graffiti removed, an expense that would hurt the business even further. Mike didn't know much about him, but still, his friends alone were responsible for at least a quarter of the Hawk's sales, and to think it was being defaced for no good reason irked him.

But it wasn't just that. It was also the fact that it was the same three guys from Jennifer's party, the ones responsible for the turn of events that had not only hurt El and put her in danger, but had led to her decision to break things off with Mike.

He thought about this as he watched them shove each other and shake the graffiti cans, laughing obnoxiously each time a new crude shape took form on the wall. They hadn't noticed Will and Mike yet.

Dustin and Lucas finally caught up, their bike brakes squeaking impatiently.

"What'd we stop for?" Lucas huffed, but he barely finished his sentence before Will held a hand up, motioning toward the side wall of the Hawk.

Dustin sighed. "Those assholes."

"You know them?" Mike asked, turning around.

"Yeah, they're the ones who broke the butter machine in September. And spilt the beer in the aisle where Lucas ate shit."

"I did not *eat shit*, I just slipped!"

"Oh please, you went flying face first down three sets of stairs, everyone - "

"It wasn't three sets, Dustin, don't be ridiculous!"

Mike turned back to the group of seniors, worried that the stupid bickering had given them away. His stomach lurched when he found that one of them, the ringleader who'd threatened El, was staring straight at him.

He reached back and shoved Lucas in the arm, desperate to silence them.

"What do you nerds think you're looking at?"

Before Mike could think of a game plan, Dustin spoke up, his voice higher than usual.

"Just passing through!"

The senior started to walk forward a little, slowly closing the space between the two groups. His friends went on with their graffiti, unbothered.

"If you were just passing through," he said, crossing his arms, "then you'd be gone by now, dweebs. So scram."

He was a good foot taller than all of them, with a heavyset brow and a thick build that made it clear that trying to fight him would be a

death wish.

Dustin, Will, and Lucas all began to amble forward, ready to pedal away. But for reasons that he wasn't exactly sure of yet, Mike stayed in place. A nervous stutter had begun in his chest and he squeezed his handlebars tightly, trying to steady the inevitable shaking that radiated down to his hands.

Dustin threw a glance over his shoulder, raising his eyebrows.

"Mike, what are you doing? Let's go," he said, his voice low.

The senior's eyes were still locked on Mike, daring him to make a move.

They're the reason.

It was irrational, but Mike couldn't push the thought from his mind. He was consumed with missing El, and even if he was grasping at nothing, seeing the people who'd been there the night everything unraveled, the night he hadn't known would be his last with El, made something inside of him snap.

He let her go. He walked out when she asked him to. He'd been a coward.

He wouldn't be a coward now.

"I think that's a real messed up thing to do," Mike found himself saying.

The senior cocked an eyebrow, like he was surprised Mike had actually spoken.

"Is that so, dweeb?"

They're the reason. They're the reason.

Mike slid off the bike seat, his limbs surging with adrenaline. He walked forward a little, trying to stand up as straight as possible.

"Yeah, it is," he replied, "picking on the Hawk just for your own sick

entertainment? It's a pretty chicken shit move, don't you think?"

The senior's friends had stopped what they were doing and walked a little closer to see what was going on. Mike heard Dustin suck in a nervous breath.

The senior was squinting in anger, and Mike began to question what the hell he was doing. This guy could knock him out in a matter of seconds. But he stayed where he was, unwilling to back down, even if it was crazy.

"I recognize you," he said finally, "you're the little shit with the psycho girlfriend."

From the corner of his eye, Mike saw Lucas get off his bike. He reached him, placing a hand on Mike's shoulder, and when he spoke, it was low so only the two of them could hear.

"This is *not* the time to pull a Saint Michael move, alright? Let's go."

He tugged on his shoulder, but Mike didn't move.

"She's not psycho," he replied, ignoring Lucas.

The senior laughed. "I'm surprised you're even defending her, when she was the one who had to stand up for that freshman kid. Where is she now, huh?"

Mike's anger was on the precipice of turning into full-blown rage.

"What is he talking about?" Lucas said. He still hadn't left Mike's side.

"Look," Mike said, clenching his teeth and doing everything in his power to stay calm, "why don't you just stop? You've drawn enough of your stupid pictures."

The senior laughed again. "Ah, so I see," he said, taking a step forward, "she taught you how to grow a pair."

They were face to face now and Mike had to crane his neck to maintain eye contact.

"You just as crazy as her, or what? What are you gonna do about it?"

He was taunting now and Mike knew it. But the anger roiled, needing some kind of release. He thought about the blank look in El's eyes the morning after the party, the way she'd recoiled when he tried to kiss her forehead.

In an instant his arms flew up, and he shoved the senior backward, as hard as he could. Clearly caught off guard, he stumbled back a few feet.

"Mike!" Lucas shouted. He ran over and took hold of Mike's arm again, pulling him toward the bikes. "Mike, come on, Mike, let's go, please," he begged, but Mike shoved him away without almost as much force.

The senior was laughing again. He looked back to his friends

"See that, boys? The dweeb's got some spunk in him!"

He was advancing again and Mike steeled himself for the inevitable. They came face to face and the senior leaned in close, the pungent odour of beer and cigarettes coming with him.

"The thing I don't understand," he said, his voice low and threatening, "is why you little shits can't just mind your own business."

There was a rustling and then Mike heard something - a sound he would've been able to pinpoint anywhere, for the amount of times he'd heard Lucas do it on all of their outdoor adventures. The flick of a blade emerging from its case. That quick, decisive slice.

Mike glanced down to see the senior clenching a knife near his belt.

The air stilled and for a crazed second Mike wondered if it was all a dream. He could hear Dustin's panicked murmurs from a few feet away: "No no no no, Mike, he has a knife, Mike."

They're the reason.

It had become a chant of encouragement now, the only thing keeping Mike from turning to run, as fast and as far away as he could.

Then he felt himself hurtling backwards and he realized he'd been shoved. He stumbled, his arms flailing, and was able to catch himself. But before he could gather his senses, the senior was moving forward again.

This time, he was holding the knife up to eye level, pointing the tip right at Mike.

"Maybe I need to leave a permanent mark on something else today," he said. And Mike knew it wasn't just a threat. This guy had no problem kicking the living shit out of a freshman kid for accidentally going through his jacket, and he'd have no problem carving out a scar on Mike's face.

He could hear his friends shouting, but his surroundings were dulled, like the master volume on everything had been turned down.

There was nothing he could do. If he ran, they'd pursue him and win, and the punishment would be worse. If he fought back, that knife could end up somewhere deadly. The best he could hope for was that it wouldn't leave too bad of a scar, or that the asshole would lose his nerve.

And so he stood there, raising his hands up to his face in spite of himself, desperate for some form of protection. The senior was grumbling a string of angry insults, the tip of the knife coming ever closer.

"Stupid little weasel, thinking you have the right to tell us to get the hell out of here, you and your dweeb crew, the nerve that - "

Crack!

Mike watched in bewilderment as the knife clattered to the ground and the senior howled in what could only be excruciating pain. It took a few seconds to register what had happened, but then Mike reeled in disgust when he saw that the senior's wrist was bent at a sickening angle. Broken.

Mike looked down and kicked the knife that now lay at his feet. It skittered down the gravel path, far out of anyone's reach.

The senior was screaming now, a string of obscenities pouring forth. Mike tried to dart out of the way, but the senior suddenly lunged forward, grabbing the front of his shirt with his good hand.

"You - you little shit - you did - "

Too stunned to move, Mike recoiled as the senior raised his fist.

But before the punch could connect his body was jolted into the air, like he was being pulled backward by an invisible rope. He flew, his limbs flailing wildly, and landed just shy of where Mike's bike was parked.

The air was still again, like time had been suspended.

Of course there was no invisible rope. It was El.

El.

Mike looked wildly around, sure that she was close by. But when he didn't see her he was again hit with the crazy fear that it was all a dream, something he'd conjured up just to see her again in some form.

But then.

"El?"

It was Dustin's voice. Mike whipped around, following his gaze.

El.

She was there, hurrying toward them down a rocky embankment next to the path. She was only a few feet away, and Mike was frozen in place - but this time it wasn't of his own volition. A heavy feeling took over his limbs and he recognized it as the same force El had used at the cabin. To keep him away.

Why is she doing it again?

She was so close and he was aching to touch her, to make sure she was real, that this was really happening.

A quick glance at his friends told him they were just as shocked. They hovered near the bikes as El advanced toward the senior, who was curled up in the fetal position, whimpering in pain.

From his vantage point, Mike watched as she stooped down. Then she spoke in the same voice she'd used that night at Jennifer's party, cold and angry.

"If you tell anyone, I'll tell my Dad that you're the ones who did this," she said, motioning to the graffiti, "maybe you've heard of him? He's the police chief."

The senior only groaned. El leaned down further. "He knows about what you did to that boy, too. People get put away for a long time for assault on a minor."

She raised a foot then, nudging the senior's slumped shoulder. "Go."

Her voice was like the embodiment of her powers - forceful, sharp, impossible to fight against. In seconds the senior was on his feet, staggering toward his friends, who dropped their paint cans.

"She-she's crazy," Mike heard him rasp, "she'll kill us."

Mike bit back the urge to laugh. He strained against El's force, watching as the three of them hurried away, half running, half walking down the rest of path.

As soon as they were out of sight, the shield lifted.

Mike didn't think. Acting on pure instinct, he raced towards El, and within seconds he was holding her, a gasp escaping her lips as they collided.

"El."

El. El.

She was real and breathing and against him, and he held her as she broke out in sobs.

"Mike."

He'd never heard her say his name like that; like she was taking her first breath after swimming up to the surface, like it was both a prayer and an answer.

Mike closed his eyes. It felt like that time they were kissing outside of his garage and the rest of the world had faded away and it was only the two of them.

Mike and El. El and Mike.

"Can someone please explain what the hell just happened!?"

Or not.

It was Dustin, who, along with Lucas and Will, was hurrying over to them.

Mike didn't want to let El go. He was still afraid she'd vanish, that any moment now he'd jolt awake in bed and feel that second, aching heartbeat ever stronger. He released her for just a moment so the guys could hug her, and once they did, he pulled her back into his side. She curled into his chest, wiping her nose with her sleeve, still shaken.

"T-that guy, he flew into the air! Like, out of nowhere! Just, boom!" Dustin said, looking between all of them.

"We know, Dustin, we saw," Lucas said.

Mike looked down at El. There was no hiding it now - but he was too distracted by having her next to him to think of a remotely plausible explanation.

It turned out he didn't have to.

"It was me," El said plainly, giving Mike a reassuring squeeze. "I - I guess I have some explaining to do."

Dustin's mouth dropped open and Lucas's eyes were comically large - even he, ever the skeptic, was dumbstruck.

"So you mean to tell me," Dustin said, "that those - those real-life

Yoda moves... that was you?"

Will spoke up then. "Mike, is... is this what you meant?"

Lucas turned to him. "What are you talking about? You knew? You knew?"

"No, I - I didn't know, exactly, but Mike said there were things... that she had - "

"*Guys*," Mike said, keenly aware of El shaking nervously against him. "Let's get out of here first before we explain everything, okay? My house."

The Paladin had spoken.

They all moved toward the bikes, Dustin muttering "Yoda. Yoda!" under his breath.

The three of them were already pedalling ahead before Mike had even picked up his bike, and, realizing he wanted a moment alone with El, he cupped his hands and shouted "We'll catch up!" after them. The only discernible response was Dustin shoving Lucas and yelling, "She's freaking *Yoda*, dude!"

He turned back to El. Though a little pale and still sniffing away tears, she was smiling. She moved forward and wrapped her arms around his waist. He breathed a sigh of relief and cupped her face in his hands, one of his thumbs rubbing gently against her temple.

"Hi," she breathed.

There was so much he wanted to say, so much he was afraid to say. He picked the first thing that came to him, the thing he was most desperate for her to know.

"I missed you so much, El."

Her eyes welled with tears.

"Mike - I - you have no idea how much - h-how bad I feel, and I - I - how much I wanted to..." her voice caught and she leaned forward to

place her cheek to his chest as she cried. "I'm so sorry," she managed to choke out.

"Don't be sorry," he said, "I shouldn't have left like that. I shouldn't have given up. I just - I didn't - "

But she stopped him, grabbing one of his hands in both of hers and placing them over her heart. It was exactly what Mike had done when they first kissed, when he wanted her to feel what he couldn't say.

"It's okay," she said quietly. "I thought I was doing the right thing. But, not being with you was..." she looked away and then shook her head, a pained expression coloring her features.

"Not being with you could never be the right thing," she said finally.

Mike blinked back his own tears and he waited, breathing evenly, feeling her heartbeat through their intertwined hands.

"How did you find me?" he asked after a while.

"Through that blank place," she replied, "the void."

He frowned, not understanding completely.

"I promised myself I wouldn't check on you, because it would make it too difficult. But sometimes I couldn't help it - I just wanted to see you, to see if you were okay. And today, I don't know why, I can't explain it but I had this feeling... something was wrong, and so I found you. I saw you and Will looking at those stupid guys doing the graffiti, and I could feel how angry you were. And I could tell you were going to do something, and I got worried - so I came out here."

Mike listened, keeping her close to him, running his fingers through her curls, doing his best to soothe her.

"I think you really scared the shit out of that senior," he said, wanting to see her smile again.

She laughed, and he felt another overwhelming wave of relief.

"It was a risk," she replied. She looked up at him and her eyes darkened. "But I couldn't let him hurt you."

She leaned in close again and they held each other tightly, savouring the silence and calm that had settled around them.

The ache was gone. She was here, she was with him, and she was going to be okay. Everything would be okay.

After a while Mike pulled back and leaned down to place a soft kiss on her lips. She responded quickly, pressing closer to him and giving one of those knee-weakening sighs. He wanted nothing more than to kiss her senseless for as long as he wanted, but he thought about his friends, waiting for them to offer a much needed explanation.

Reluctantly, he pulled away. "Should we go?"

She nodded and they both climbed onto his bike, El anchoring herself to him like always.

He pedalled away and then they were off, flying through the twilight, toward their friends. Toward home. The two of them, together, the way it should be. The way it was always supposed to be.

Ahh, I really can't believe this story is coming to a close. This is of course the end of the chaptered parts, but not to worry, an epilogue is on the way!

I want to thank everyone who has stayed with this since the beginning. This was my first ever multi-chapter fic, and it was a learning experience. Things changed here and there, but in the end I feel like I stayed true to what I promised at the beginning, which was that this would be a very Mileven-centric story, one that, though a little quieter in terms of action and excitement, explored both of their characters a little deeper. I wanted to write Mike finding out about El on his own, in an AU setting, so in many ways this was a fic that I felt like I needed to get off my chest, if that makes sense. Either way, it's been such a joy to write and I love this show and these characters so darn much it's unbelievable.

As always, please please please leave a review if you'd like! They mean more to me than I can ever express. And come say hi on Tumblr writer-lia if you feel so inclined :) Thanks again!

13. Epilogue

It turned out that El was well aware of the idea of *boyfriend-girlfriend*. Mike's assumptions had been, as usual, completely ridiculous.

"I wasn't sure who was supposed to ask about it," she'd confessed a few days after the incident with the seniors, when Mike finally plucked up the courage to tell her about the interaction with Susannah.

"I know I said there was no such thing as normal," he'd told her. "But I think I'm the one who was supposed to ask."

So he did.

It felt silly, because to Mike, the moment she'd revealed her powers to him that day in the AV room and he'd promised to protect her, he'd been hers. And even though he thought he lost her, the moment she came rushing down that gravel path to his rescue, he was hers again. Being together felt so intuitive, so right, that crossing over into the territory of labels and roles didn't feel necessary. But it was another way for Mike to ensure El knew how much he wanted to be with her.

He wanted to be hers in every way - the person she turned to instinctively, the one she wanted to share everything with. If he knew nothing else, he knew that. It helped that El smiled and nodded enthusiastically at the idea. Before she could even get the question out, she'd ended up flinging her arms around his neck and pulling him in for a kiss.

Telling the rest of the party about El's powers had been a minefield, especially after the adrenaline-fuelled encounter with the seniors.

Lucas, for example, was furious that they didn't tell him what happened at Jennifer's party - not because Will had been the first to know something was up, but because they'd violated a pillar of party code: 'When a party member is in need of assistance, all members must ban together to help them.'

Lucas, a stickler for the rules, but always the first to have your back.

Dustin, on the other hand, had relentlessly peppered El with questions about her powers: how she got them, what she could do, if she could kill people. Good natured as they were, he'd encroached on things that El obviously wasn't comfortable talking about yet, things about the lab that she hadn't even told Mike.

Dustin, forever curious, always the first to remind his friends how awesome and cool they were.

Will had been the one to step in then. He'd listened quietly the whole time, not asking anything, gently suggesting that perhaps El was tired, and that he was sure she'd tell them the full story one day soon.

Will the Wise, who never failed to gracefully bring everyone back down to reality.

The relief Mike felt when the truth was finally out was palpable. His friends had instantly waved off his confessions about feeling like he'd betrayed them for keeping El's secret.

"You were protective of her from day one," Lucas had said.

El had looked up at him in wonder at that, wearing that beautiful smile, and Mike blushed but didn't protest, because it was true.

He'd wanted to know her, and when he knew her, he wanted to protect her - an instinct he could never shake, even when he saw firsthand that she was more powerful than he could ever be and didn't need him to save her. After that night at Jennifer's party, after losing El, he thought he'd failed. It took her coming back and risking everything to save him and the party for Mike to realize that you can never really protect the people you love.

You can try. But the only thing you can really do, that you can be sure of, is love them.

God, you can love them.

A few weeks later, everything had fallen into a somewhat normal

rhythm. El was back at school and catching up with her classes. She'd started to show Mike some of her pieces from art class, including the drawing of the bike, which she let him keep.

He'd taped it to the wall beside his bed, so it was the first thing he saw every morning.

It was nearly December and finally too cold to bike, so they didn't have the luxury of long rides to the cabin after school anymore, a guaranteed amount of alone time they both cherished.

So Mike, having reprised his role as AV room setup person, decided that Wednesdays at lunch would be for him and El.

He'd take her with him to get the keys and then they'd go to the room, trying to ignore the awkward wink Barry gave Mike each time. She'd bring some homework, or sit and fold paper cranes, or help Mike with his duties. Sometimes they talked nonstop, sharing stories and laughing and teasing each other. Sometimes they settled into a comfortable silence, both relieved and happy to just be in one another's presence. Sometimes they kissed.

Okay, they kissed *way* more often than sometimes. If it were up to Mike, and evidently El, too, they'd spend the whole time kissing. But Mike was always careful not to let it get too carried away, otherwise he knew he'd never get anything done, and then his friends would tease him even further about what exactly he'd spent the AV club prep time doing.

It was also because Mike was sometimes afraid of how much he felt for El, how much being close to her made him lose all sense of himself. The feeling wasn't bad or scary in the true sense of the word, it was just... so much. It made his heart pound and his chest ache even when he wasn't with her, the familiar *I love you I love you I love you* clanging louder each time they were together.

He hadn't figured out a way to say it yet, still grappling with how he was going to keep it together and not sound like a total idiot. For now, he tried to pour everything he felt into their kisses, always hugging her close, smiling against her mouth because he couldn't help it. Which was why it was so hard to resist spending their entire

time in the AV room doing it.

This was one of those times.

They were seated at the edge of the main desk, Mike tinkering away at one of the soundboards, El sitting with a textbook open on her lap. She had her feet propped up on a chair and was twirling a finger lazily in her hair, which Mike found oddly distracting. He kept glancing up at her, trying and failing not to stare.

God, she's beautiful.

"Mike?"

"Mm?" he responded, trying to sound casual as he looked back down at the soundboard. He uselessly fiddled with one of the loose dials.

"I have to tell you something," El said.

Mike froze, a familiar sense of dread creeping through him. "Okay," he replied, trying to hide the worry in his voice.

She took her feet off the chair and closed the textbook, placing it on the desk. Scooting closer, she kept her eyes on him. "But I'm... I'm scared," she said, her voice dropping to a murmur.

Now that he knew a little more about her past, that didn't surprise Mike. A lot of awful things happened to her in the lab that she was scared to talk about, so Mike made sure not to ask too many questions. They only talked about it when she brought it up, always as a way for her to get something off her chest - like the more she spoke about the horror, the more manageable it became. Mike always listened, doing his best to breathe and still his shaking hands. Sometimes he could hardly bear to hear it, to think about her in pain and alone and suffering.

"It's okay El, you don't have to tell me anything you don't want to," he said, placing his hand over hers.

"No - no I want to," she said quickly, "I just - I don't know what you'll say."

"Well I mean, you've heard me ramble. Most of the time I don't even know what the hell I'm about to say," Mike replied, trying to lighten the mood a little. She looked nervous.

"I know, but usually I can tell what you're thinking."

"Oh really? So you're a mind reader too?" he said, grinning at her.

She leaned toward him and placed a hand on his forehead, gently brushing some of his hair out of the way. He closed his eyes and leaned into her touch.

"No, but I like to think I know what's going on in there," she said, tapping her fingers a little. He laughed.

She pulled her hand away and Mike opened his eyes. She still looked nervous, but there was something else in her eyes he couldn't quite place.

"What is it, El?"

In a sudden movement, she got off her chair and ambled onto his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck. Surprised, he stopped what he was doing, encircling her waist so she was secure. Though it didn't have the same effect it had at Jennifer's party - they sat like that sometimes in the AV room, when they were both focused on different things but wanted to be close - he was still taken aback.

It wasn't that El didn't show affection. The frequent kisses and handholding and general closeness were enough evidence. But she was always very careful, like she was afraid of doing something incorrectly. Mike did his best to reassure her that she was doing just fine - he was still learning too, after all.

She leaned her head down to rest on his shoulder. Mike thought he could feel her heart beating, but it could've just been his own, which, like always, had started to race the moment she came close to him.

Her cheek was against his collarbone and he waited, thinking maybe she'd changed her mind about telling him anything.

But then.

"I love you," she said quietly.

He could feel her exhale against his skin, her whole body relaxing into their embrace.

She seemed to be catching her breath, but Mike had lost his. His mouth went dry, and the pace of his heartbeat became even more erratic. That was the last thing he expected her to say.

Thoughts flew through his mind, and the first one that stood out was how he'd been a complete moron for assuming she wouldn't understand the gravity of those words.

The way she said them – so deliberate – the way she pulled him close... she knew, and she was careful with them. How could he have been so stupid?

El's head moved back, snapping him out of his reverie. There was a timid fear in her eyes – but this time he knew where it was coming from, and how to fix it.

"I love you too," he told her. "I love you, El," he said again; both so that she would be certain, and so Mike could make sure the words were really out loud and not in his head.

She rested her head back against his shoulder and for a while they stayed like that, holding each other. The air in the room had entirely changed. It was now blanketed with a heavy feeling, a marker of importance; like if something shifted, it would break the spell.

To his surprise again, it was El who moved first. She pulled back to look at him, bringing her hands down to rest against his chest. Mike didn't let go of her. He felt like he couldn't even if he wanted to.

"I didn't know the words," she told him, answering the question still in the back of his head. *She's a mind reader after all.* "Well I did, but... not all the way."

"But being with you... I knew what it was," she continued. "So I paid attention to people when they said it - why, how. And I read, like always."

The nervousness from before had been replaced with a boldness in her eyes, something Mike hadn't seen since the day she first showed him her powers.

"I knew, I did," she insisted, "It was there I just... had to find the words." She looked away then. "The only thing I didn't know was if you would want to say it to me, too."

Mike lifted both hands to cup her face, suddenly desperate.

"No El, no - of course I wanted to say it. I've been thinking about it for - God, for so long, I just - I didn't know how you'd react, or... if you felt the same."

She frowned. "Did I not show you enough?"

Coming from anyone else, it would've sounded accusatory. But Mike knew El meant it as a question, wondering if she'd done something wrong or not done something she should have.

"You did El, you do," he said, rushing to reassure her. "I was, I don't know..."

"Scared?"

"Yeah, scared."

She placed one of her hands over his. "Don't be scared. I love you."

She was right. There was nothing to be afraid of, not anymore. And if there was, they'd figure it out together. They'd protect each other, like always.

Unable to find words, Mike kissed her. She kissed him back, hard, and he could feel the boldness that had been in her eyes earlier. Normally it took them a second to adjust, to figure out the pace of things. Not this time.

This time, they knew.

That's it that's all, folks! *cries*

Thank you SO much to everyone to read and took the time to comment on this fic, especially OfPencilsAndPenguins - your comments made my day and the fact that you left such lengthy detailed remarks really made me feel special!

I'll be posting a oneshot soon as part of the Summer series that some of the wonderful writers in this fandom have going on both here and on Tumblr, so keep an eye out for that!

In the meantime, if you'd like to say hello, please feel free to on Tumblr writer-lia. And please send Mileven prompts if you have some! I haven't received any yet and I'd love to do some cute little drabbles if inspiration hits.

Thank you all SO much from the bottom of my heart! 3